



European partnership for
health, equity & wellbeing

EuroHealthNet Conference Report

– Unlocking the Potential of the European Semester: Achieving a Wellbeing Economy through Participatory Societies

7 December 2023, Brussels and online

Co-hosted by the European Economic and Social Committee

Introduction

On 7 December 2023, EuroHealthNet organised a conference on the European Semester and its potential to foster a Wellbeing Economy through Participatory Societies across the EU.

Amidst interconnected global crises that have escalated in recent years, the European Union is facing numerous challenges and threats to its societies, economies, and democratic values. These challenges particularly impact on people in vulnerable situations, resulting in widening social and health inequalities. We need **comprehensive responses and forward-looking socio-economic policies, placing people and the planet at their core**. As we come closer to the 2024 EU institutional renewal, exploring the potential of directions for alternative policy solutions in the EU will play a pivotal role.

The concept of a 'Wellbeing Economy' emphasises holistic measures and the importance of multisectoral collaboration through co-creative approaches. The model promotes an economy that benefits all people as well as the planet, and ensures human dignity and fairness. By integrating the 'Wellbeing Economy' into its socioeconomic policies, particularly the European Semester, the EU could transition towards a systems thinking governance, considering not just the economic, but also natural, human and social assets. This would further strengthen the European Pillar of Social Rights and the European Health Union beyond 2024, thereby supporting democratic and participatory approaches and building stronger and more inclusive societies, ready to withstand current and future challenges.

EuroHealthNet has been advocating for a stronger social and health equity dimension within the European Semester and for a 'Wellbeing Economy'. Bringing together representatives from all areas of organised civil society, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has always been an important partner actively promoting a 'Wellbeing Economy' and calling for an enhanced use of co-creation models.

Building on this expertise and a wide range of activities conducted throughout the past years at national and EU level, EuroHealthNet and the EESC organised this conference to take this debate further and make concrete suggestions for the next steps beyond the European elections in 2024.

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1 Welcome and introduction

Baiba Miltoviča, President of the TEN Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, EESC

Ms Miltoviča welcomed the participants and thanked EuroHealthNet for organising the conference.

She highlighted the essential role of the European Economic and Social Committee in bringing civil society organisations together particularly on the topic of a Wellbeing Economy as they can share good practices.

Ms Miltoviča highlighted the importance of affordable housing as well as energy affordability and invited stakeholders to an [EESC event on 'Housing crisis in Europe' on 20 February 2024](#).

Georgi Stoev, President of the TEN Permanent Group on Services of general interest, EESC

Mr Stoev also welcomed the participants and thanked for the organisation of a conference on such an important topic. He agreed that housing is one of the key issues that needs to be addressed and raised the question what effects digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence (AI) might have on a Wellbeing Economy.

Caroline Costongs, Director of EuroHealthNet

Ms Costongs introduced the EuroHealthNet Partnership. She highlighted that health and wellbeing depend on many different sectors and factors. Unsustainable economic growth comes at a social, health and environmental cost. To achieve a Wellbeing Economy for health equity, the economic system needs to be redesigned, as it has significant impacts on the quality of life and working environments.

The European Semester has the ability to transform the system but its full potential still needs to be unlocked. For this to happen, it is important to include citizens in the process and build on their experiences. Therefore, EuroHealthNet has organised several events in 2023 (e.g., in Belgium, Spain and Finland) to discuss the European Semester and its potential to contribute to a transition towards Wellbeing Economies in the EU. Finally, she drew attention to the fact that EuroHealthNet has just released a [Policy Paper on 'How to achieve an Economy of Wellbeing with the support of the European Semester'](#).

2 Setting the scene: The concept of a 'Wellbeing Economy'

What is the potential of the 'Wellbeing Economy' to reduce social, health and environmental inequalities and costs?

Vania Putatti, Policy Coordinator at EuroHealthNet

The Economy of Wellbeing (EoW) advocates for a paradigm shift in policy and governance, prioritising people's wellbeing in decision-making. The EoW aims to build a resilient and equitable society capable of withstanding societal and environmental challenges. It challenges the conventional reliance on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the primary economic health indicator, arguing that exclusive focus on economic growth often comes at the expense of the environment, social rights, public health, and overall wellbeing.

Introduced in the EU's policy discourse through the [2019 Council Conclusions on the Economy of Wellbeing](#), the EoW sought to influence a new long-term strategy to succeed the Europe 2020 growth and jobs strategy. Although not explicitly incorporated into EU strategies, the 2019 von der Leyen Commission [introduced a sustainable growth narrative](#) in the Annual Sustainable Growth Strategy 2020. This narrative, aligning with EoW principles, emphasises competitive sustainability to build an economy beneficial for both people and the planet.

This transformation of the European Semester puts forward evident changes to issue prioritisation and funding allocation. At the same time, a lot more needs to be done to harness the potential of the European Semester to promote a true Wellbeing Economy approach in the EU.

Vania Putatti's PowerPoint presentation can be found under the following [link](#).

3

The co-benefits of integrating the Wellbeing Economy into the European Semester

The path we travel: Did the European Semester become more suitable to reduce social, health and environmental inequalities?

Katia Berti, Head of Unit, Employment and social aspects of the European Semester, DG EMPL, European Commission

Since its inception in 2010, the European Semester has undergone significant transformations, placing increased emphasis on social considerations. Key advancements in this domain include the introduction of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) (EPSR) and of the [Social Scoreboard](#). Under the von der Leyen Commission, the European Semester has evolved to encompass not only economic and social aspects but also the green dimension. Furthermore, a notable development is the stronger alignment between EU Funds and the European Semester, a link further reinforced by the establishment of the [Recovery and Resilience Facility](#).

The Autumn package for the 2024 cycle was launched in November 2023, including the proposal for the Joint Employment Report 2023. A novelty of the Joint Employment Report, is that it monitors the national targets on jobs, skills and poverty reduction by 2030. Furthermore, the report places heightened emphasis on the implementation of the EPSR, aligning with the principles of a Social Convergence Framework¹. In this regard, it diligently identifies potential risks to upward social convergence in the European Union.

Finally, Ms Berti referred to the Informal Working Group on Social Investment launched by the Spanish and the Belgian Presidencies of the Council of the EU, whose activities will be

¹ For more information please see [Key Messages of the Employment Committee and the Social Protection Committee on the Social Convergence Framework](#) at their joint meeting on 12 May 2023, with a view to the Council meeting (EPSCO) on 12 June 2023.

the basis for the preparation of the ECOFIN-EPSCO (JUMBO) Council meeting that will take place in March 2024².

Katia Berti's PowerPoint presentation can be found under the following [link](#).

Dirk Van den Steen, Deputy Head of Unit, State of Health, European Semester, Health Technology Assessment, DG SANTE, European Commission

Mr Van den Steen highlighted the growing attention that is being given to health and healthcare within the Country Specific Recommendations (CSR) of the European Semester.

While he acknowledged that several problems are still prominent in the EU Member States, such as workforce shortage in health and care, he commented that the inclusion of these problems in the CSR offers Member States a way to improve the situation.

In fact, since the pandemic all 27 EU Member States have a recurring thematic annexes that discuss population health and a recommendation in the resilience of their health systems. By now all national plans include measures in the healthcare domain, clearly showing the progress the European Semester has made in terms of prioritising health. The recommendations range from improving access, adequacy and affordability of health and long-term care (Estonia, Greece), ensuring sustainable funding and taxation in terms of the coverage of social protection (Latvia, Austria, Slovenia), to strengthening primary and scaling up preventive care (Lithuania).

Mr Van den Steen's PowerPoint presentation can be found under the following [link](#).

Istvan Ujhelyi, Member of the European Parliament

MEP Ujhelyi stressed how essential it is for European societies to move more towards a Wellbeing Economy and raised the question of how the concept of a Wellbeing Economy could be better integrated into the European Semester process.

Highlighting the need to improve health-related indicators in the European Semester that can be measured consistently, he argued that data on the indicators must be available, comparable and up-to-date. Moreover, collected data must be accurate for different types of the population, looking at intersectional factors.

According to MEP Ujhelyi there is a need for an overarching wellbeing strategy in the EU, which includes higher investments in the social and human capital of the society, to reach a Wellbeing Economy. Echoing EuroHealthNet's conclusions, he also called for a minimum quality standard of public health systems across Europe to be established, offering a basic access to all citizens, irrespective of the country they live in. He further argued for a stress

² Economic and Finance Ministers and Employment and Social Affairs ministers will be invited to discuss about the interplay between social investments and reforms, economic growth, macro-economic stabilisation, and upward social convergence.

test in public health systems as part of the European Semester, in which all measures are tested according to their impacts.

How could it further be improved after 2024? Reactions

Luca Jahier, President of the EESC European Semester Group

Mr Jahier initially addressed the disparities in health expenditures across the EU. He noted that the universal health system is currently in a bad state, marked by a notable shortage of general practitioners. In general, EU Member States have not made substantial investments in healthcare. Mr Jahier welcomed the fact, that states have, on average, allocated approximately 30% of their Recovery and Resilience Funds to bolstering social objectives. However, he highlighted that the effectiveness of these reforms still requires evaluation.

In order to achieve a Wellbeing Economy, Mr Jahier advocated for a new approach to the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey (ASGS) in which the social dimension is not a mere appendix but on equal footing with economic and environmental dimensions. He highlighted the importance of establishing more effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, which the EESC had noted in its opinion adopted in 2023. He furthermore proposed to reform the economic governance using incentives rather than sanctions, and link the incentives with the recommendations' implementation to the EU budget. It is, however, difficult as much as crucial to find agreement on indicators that move beyond GDP. In his opinion, deficits, social imbalance, health and environment should be seen as the four essential conditions that the ASGS should focus on.

Michael Weatherhead, Development Lead, Wellbeing Economy Alliance

Mr Weatherhead offered his perspective on the European Semester after 2024 and highlighted that it should continue to focus on prevention and mitigation. He argued that economy, social, health and the environment are not equal pillars but that the economy should be in service of social, health and environmental objectives. Building on that, a change of mindset would dispel the false dichotomous narratives that economic growth and public health cannot come together. Such a shift would be beneficial in terms of accelerated progress, building a common language, and polling the resources for the 'common good' – essential elements of a Wellbeing Economy approach. He highlighted the impact this would have on current as well as future generations which is why the long-term needs should be kept in the conversation.

Zuzana Konradova, EU Affairs Coordinator, Eurochild

Ms Konradova underscored the importance of incorporating indicators that specifically consider the situation of children into the Social Scoreboard. Currently, there are three indicators related to children: one on child poverty, one on school dropouts and one on early childhood education and care participation. However, she highlighted that not all vulnerable groups of children are sufficiently accounted for by these indicators and that the employment situation in the families play an important role with regard to the children's development.

As to the European Semester, and more precisely the Spring package 2023, she criticised that only five Country Specific Recommendations focus on children and child poverty, while the issue should be taken up more seriously if the Semester's social objectives are to be met. The European Semester has a good opportunity to guide and assess the European work on combating child poverty and while the European Child Guarantee is a first step, the European Semester can further help the work on implementing the proposed policies.

Eero Yrjö-Koskinen, Director of the Institute for European Environmental Policy

The correlation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the European Semester were addressed by Mr Yrjö-Koskinen. He criticised the lack of legal obligations to meet SDG targets and the unavailability of funding to invest in SDG related projects.

Moreover, he stressed that while the European Semester currently has 21 indicators that are directed at the environment, most of them are focused on energy aspects, rather than the overall environmental issues and called for an improvement thereof. Environmental and climate change issues looked at from a broader – systems-wide perspective would help to steer the European Semester more towards socially just greener policies that benefit the people and communities.

Discussion and interventions from the floor

Johanna Salge Schima, Head of EU Delegation at Make Mothers Matter, raised the point that the gender aspect is crucial in a Wellbeing Economy and highlighted that it needs to be stressed more in the agenda, building upon the work of the EU 'Gender equality strategy'.

Ingrid Stegeman, Programme Manager at EuroHealthNet and author of the EuroHealthNet Policy Paper [How to achieve an Economy of Wellbeing with the support of the European Semester](#), stressed the complexity of the European Semester focusing on many areas. On the one hand, it is an economic tool linked to financial resources that integrated social aspects over time, on the other hand the environmental aspects of the European Semester also need to be considered. She raised the question of how people can engage with the tool and how it can be strengthened, considering its complexity.

Tomas de Jong, Policy Manager at European Public Health Alliance, asked for clarification on the relation between policy tools and the design of the European Semester and what can be done to create synergies between the two. He further highlighted the growing need for efficiency in the healthcare system, which at the same time does not include a clear enough system to safeguard vulnerable people.

Katrina Messiha, PhD fellow at the Medical Centre of the Free University Amsterdam, researching theory-based principles for co-creation in public health, highlighted the dynamic process of co-creation, including the interaction between various stakeholders. She stressed the necessity to move beyond a one-dimensional thinking, as the issues in public health are more complex than this simplified approach could help.

4

From theory to practice: Unlocking the potential of the European Semester and achieving a Wellbeing Economy through participatory societies

Participatory processes and their importance for fostering a Wellbeing Economy in the European Semester

Krzysztof Balon, Member of the EESC and rapporteur on the own-initiative opinion of the EESC on co-creation of services of general interest as a contribution to a more participative democracy in the EU (2022/C 486/11)

Krzysztof Balon's PowerPoint presentation can be found under the following [link](#).

Mr Balon presented the main elements of his [own-initiative opinion on co-creation of services of general interest](#) (SGIs) in the EU and identified SGIs as a key aspect of the European social model and a fundamental right for all citizens.

He highlighted the need to develop SGIs jointly with civil society organisations and citizens to make sure they are in the interest of the beneficiaries, such as in example of the Article 77 of the [Directive 2014/24/EU on public procurement](#). When the citizens' needs are prioritised and committed to in law, Member States are enabled to reserve contracts for certain health, social and cultural, as well as educational services, as listed in that article, to non-profit organisations.

Moreover, Mr Balon stressed that in the own-initiative opinion, the European Commission is asked to publish a working document on this subject as a basis for further work, aiming at the creation of a 'toolkit', which should encourage and guide national, regional and local authorities towards enhanced use of co-creation models.

In a direct question to Mr Balon, a participant highlighted that the level of involvement of civil society in EU Member States during the drafting process of the National Reform Programmes very much differs, and that even within the European Commission different Directorate-General's are not involved and heard equally. She thus raised the question how the co-creation process could be further improved in the EU Member States and in the Commission.

The added value of involving Civil Society Organisations in the European Semester

Kirsi Marttinen, Senior Adviser, SOSTE Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health

Ms Marttinen observes that the European Semester may not be widely familiar, and it may appear distant to many. Simultaneously, she highlights the importance of actively engaging Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to enhance the accessibility and inclusivity of the European Semester across diverse population groups.

Collaborating with CSOs is instrumental in addressing the absence of empirical evidence resulting from outdated or inadequate data. Through their grassroots work CSOs are aware of what is happening on the ground. They often dispose of information that is not yet available to public authorities. No impact assessment can fully assess the real-life information that civil society, on the other hand, can provide, and it can help to design the European Semester towards a more inclusive programme. It is thus crucial to include the CSOs' knowledge in the European Semester, either via national governance structures (such as the Finnish 'EU Committee') or via links with the European Commission.

For this to happen, a reform of the European Semester is needed that follows the [recommendations of the European Economic and Social Committee](#). Involving CSOs as a crucial pillar in the Semester would strengthen its democracy and transparency. Moreover, the existing system of indicators must be reviewed, complemented and made consistent with each other to accurately present the situation.

The sustainable economy we need

Maria Nikolopoulou, Vice President of the Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment (NAT), EESC

Ms Nikolopoulou identified a Wellbeing Economy as key approach to move forward, tackle the many challenges in the European Union and to progress on achieving the SDGs. To guarantee their proper implementation the EU urgently needs to develop the foundations for a sustainable and inclusive wellbeing economy that works for everyone. For this, several new economic models exist that have the potential to transform the economy, such as the circular or sustainable economy for example. CSOs and trade unions need to be taken into consideration when moving forward.

As stated in the [EESC opinion on 'The sustainable economy we need'](#), social progress cannot be achieved through GDP as it ignores important elements of individual and social wellbeing and fails to account properly for environmental and social considerations. This is why an EU 'wellbeing budget' is needed, focusing on three pillars: individual and collective wellbeing, multi-stakeholder governance, and wealth (meant as a combination of human capital, nature and financial resources). It is imperative to realign existing policies with the principles of the just transition and the Wellbeing Economy to realise this shift.

Ms Nikolopoulou advocated for a new EU Green and Social Deal which can initiate fundamental changes in the in the economic and monetary system. The goal is to cultivate an

economy that directly caters to people's needs, highlighting the indispensable role of future generations in steering this transformative journey.

5

A vision and recommendations from EuroHealthNet for a European Semester that contributes to a Wellbeing Economy - Closing remarks and next steps

Caroline Costongs, Director of EuroHealthNet

In her closing remarks, Ms Costongs identified the concept of a Wellbeing Economy as a vision of hope for positive change but also as a vision that should be attractive for all people in our society. Including citizens in the process to achieving it, is an important aspect not to lose the people on the way.

She referred to EuroHealthNet's recently published [Health priorities for 2024 – 2029](#) and the EuroHealthNet Policy Paper [How to achieve an Economy of Wellbeing with the support of the European Semester](#) which outline very clearly, what changes need to be made. Recommendations include:

- An overarching EU Wellbeing Economy strategy.
- Ensure that the European Semester process takes a stronger Wellbeing Economy-oriented approach, to weigh, in a more balanced way, economic, social and environmental assets and opportunities for reform .
- Appoint a European Commission Vice-President for a Wellbeing Economy.
- Establish an expert group to select the most appropriate wellbeing indicators for a 'Wellbeing Dashboard' and a 'Wellbeing Alert Mechanism' in the European Semester
- Pursue a Social Convergence Framework.
- Push for more transparency and engagement in the European Semester process.

Annexes

I. Agenda

Unlocking the Potential of the European Semester: Achieving a Wellbeing Economy through Participatory Societies

AGENDA

Format: In-person and livestream

Date: 7 December 2023, 14h00 – 18h00

Place: Room JDE62, Rue Belliard 99/101, 1040 Bruxelles, European Economic and Social Committee, 1040 Brussels, Belgium

14.00 – 14.30 - **Registration**

14.30 – 15.00

Welcome

- **Baiba Miltoviča**, President of the TEN Section for Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and the Information Society, EESC
- **Georgi Stoev**, President of the TEN Permanent Group on Services of general interest, EESC

Introduction

- **Caroline Costongs**, Director of EuroHealthNet

Setting the scene: The concept of a 'Wellbeing Economy'

What is the potential of the 'Wellbeing Economy' to reduce social, health and environmental inequalities and costs?

- **Vania Putatti**, Policy Coordinator at EuroHealthNet

15.00 – 16.00

The co-benefits of integrating the Wellbeing Economy into the European Semester

Moderator: **Caroline Costongs**, Director at EuroHealthNet

The path we travel: Did the European Semester become more suitable to reduce social, health and environmental inequalities?

- **Katia Berti**, Head Of Unit, Employment and social aspects of the European Semester, DG EMPL, European Commission
- **Dirk Van den Steen**, Deputy Head of Unit, State of Health, European Semester, Health Technology Assessment, DG SANTE, European Commission
- **Istvan Ujhelyi**, Member of the European Parliament

How could it further be improved after 2024? Reactions

- **Luca Jahier**, President of the EESC European Semester Group
- **Michael Weatherhead**, Development Lead, Wellbeing Economy Alliance
- **Zuzana Konradova**, EU Affairs Coordinator, Eurochild
- **Eero Yrjö-Koskinen**, Director of the Institute for European Environmental Policy

16.15 – 16.30 - **Coffee break**

16.30 – 17.30

From theory to practice: Unlocking the potential of the European Semester and achieving a Wellbeing Economy through participatory societies

Moderator: **Dorota Sienkiewicz**, Policy Manager at EuroHealthNet

Interventions from the floor

Participatory processes and their importance for fostering a Wellbeing Economy in the European Semester

Krzysztof Balon, Member of the EESC and rapporteur on the own-initiative opinion of the EESC on co-creation of services of general interest as a contribution to a more participative democracy in the EU ([2022/C 486/11](#))

The added value of involving Civil Society organisations in the European Semester

Kirsi Marttinen, Senior Adviser, SOSTE Finnish Federation for Social Affairs and Health

The sustainable economy we need

Maria Nikolopoulou, Vice President of the Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment (NAT), EESC

17.30 – 17.45

A vision and recommendations from EuroHealthNet for a European Semester that contributes to a Wellbeing Economy - Closing remarks and next steps

Caroline Costongs, Director of EuroHealthNet

EuroHealthNet

European partnership for **health, equity & wellbeing**



Our mission is to help build healthier communities and tackle health inequalities within and between European States.

EuroHealthNet is a not-for-profit partnership of organisations, agencies and statutory bodies working on public health, promoting health, preventing disease, and reducing inequalities.

EuroHealthNet supports members' work through policy and project development, knowledge and expertise exchange, research, networking, and communications.

EuroHealthNet's work is spread across three collaborating platforms that focus on practice, policy, and research. Core and cross-cutting activities unite and amplify the partnership's activities.

The partnership is made up of members, associate members, and observers. It is governed by a General Council and Executive Board.

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