



CEI Plan of Action 2021-2023

Elaborated by the CEI-Executive Secretariat, in cooperation with the CEI Member States, the CEI Plan of Action 2021-2023 is conceived as a flexible and dynamic tool for manifold cooperation in the framework of the CEI, complementing the CEI Guidelines and Rules of Procedure - the regulatory charter of the Organisation. In advancing its mission as a *regional intergovernmental forum working towards European integration and sustainable development*, the CEI provides a platform for upholding political dialogue and project cooperation, thus helping maintain cooperative relations and building confidence among the Member States, and cooperates with the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN), other international and regional organisations and international financial institutions, public or private institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as with other partners.

Introduction

The CEI Plan of Action (PoA) offers a strategic framework and goal-oriented roadmap tailored to meet the needs of Member States, while advancing the mission of the Organisation to achieve two far-reaching priorities, namely supporting European integration and promoting sustainable development of the CEI region. These processes are guided by various normative documents as well as by policies and strategies, mainly of the EU and the UN. Yet, for the attainment of the desired results, they call for a joint action and coordinated approach from the whole international community, including regional organisations and intergovernmental fora such as the CEI, leading to cohesion and solidarity, and thus leaving no one behind.

With regard to the European integration process of the non-EU CEI countries, a number of new developments have occurred in the last few years. A credible enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans has been reinforced; the enlargement methodology has been revised; and an ambitious economic and investment plan for the Western Balkans has been issued. The Eastern European countries have made favourable steps towards establishing closer links with the EU, regarding in particular, the creation of a common economic space between the EU and the six members of the Eastern Partnership. The integration process, however, requires the adoption and implementation of numerous reforms in various sectors, transparent institutions and full respect for democratic values and rule of law, development of good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation, further economic integration preparing economies to face competition, while complying with environmental standards. Hence, the transfer of knowledge on European integration issues among EU and non-EU CEI Member States is considered of paramount importance and value in this process and is vigorously promoted within the CEI.

For the promotion of sustainable development, many efforts have been made by all CEI countries in the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), yet gaps and needs persist. Better coordination of sustainable development actions encouraging the implementation of the SDGs is of paramount significance. Challenges and threats such as rising inequalities and vulnerabilities, environmental pressures and climate change, rapid urbanisation, and others, remain to be addressed. Therefore, enhancing cooperation in the framework of the CEI, leading to a transformed region with sustainable development as the engine of economic prosperity, environmental quality and social well-being, where inequalities are reduced and opportunities are created, is essential.

Furthermore, the countries and the whole world have recently faced an unprecedented challenge - the COVID-19 pandemic - posing them to serious risks not only from a public health point of view, but also from an economic and social perspective. Curbing its negative impacts to the societies in the years to come requires harmonised and systematic efforts for its efficient management and eradication.

To further tackle these issues, promotion of effective models fostering solid economic growth and social convergence able to address the challenges, and that are both climate resilient and inclusive, is a top notch priority, also taking into consideration trends, such as technological advancements, digitalisation, international scientific cooperation. The economic potential and development benefits of inclusion and environmental sustainability are enormous. Realising the potential in a sustainable and coordinated manner would eventually create greater and equal opportunities for the region and its citizens. In this regard, given the transitional character of challenges and threats, intergovernmental cooperation remains of the utmost importance for at least several reasons: inter-governmental bodies are well-positioned to support dialogue and exchange views, and thus provide a platform for peer-to-peer review of national efforts within a wider context, and to promote

knowledge sharing and multi-sector collaboration, thus help countries develop best practices in a constructive environment.

Against this backdrop, the document provides a framework for actions needed to pursue the current challenges and trends, while creating cohesion between the CEI countries in the implementation of the two priorities and their transformation into tangible results for the Member States. To do so, the PoA is centred around two main pillars: 1. CEI approach to regional cooperation, defining in particular the joint line of action among the Member States, and 2. CEI Agenda for the upcoming period, identifying the potential goals and objectives to be undertaken through the jointly defined approach.

I. CEI Strategic Approach to Regional Cooperation

In order for the CEI to continue to adapt to new scenarios and be able to fully respond to the geopolitical situation in the years ahead, the PoA reflects on the international context in which the CEI operates, underpinning its mission, as well as on its working methodology and main assets. It also reflects on the potential for their improvement as well as on actions needed to tackle the current challenges and trends, and thus transform them into tangible results for Member States.

The international context

Acknowledging the rapidly changing international context and defining, thereby, a joint approach among Member States in managing pressing issues is of great importance. Current realities linked to European integration and sustainable development as mentioned above, confirm the importance of a secure and prosperous region.

Globally every aspect of security can be jeopardised due to threats such as risks to public health as the current COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, organised crime and corruption, massive illegal migration flows. These threats do pose challenges, but they also demonstrate the necessity for countries to cooperate in the spirit of international and regional cooperation and effective multilateralism. Since the nature of many of these threats is transitional, there is a need to address them more systematically at regional level, in particular through intergovernmental frameworks such as the CEI.

The current international development agenda regarding European integration and sustainable development, which is the main mission of the CEI, is mainly towed by the UN 2030 Agenda, the Paris Agreement on climate change, European Green Deal, EU policies and strategies, and other multilateral frameworks. Given its size and nature as a multilateral intergovernmental forum, the CEI, in meeting the goals set by these normative documents, has a great opportunity to shape global and European efforts, thus determining regional cohesion and future progress. In this regard, only by meeting goals that contribute to equal opportunities, as well as by working together towards integration and prosperity, can the region move forward along the desired success.

The working methodology

In order to offer a solid contribution to its mission, the CEI's *modus operandi* consists in the already established working methodology, based on two fundamental pillars: multilateral diplomacy and project cooperation, also by paying particular attention to strategic partnerships and untapped potentials, stemming from its comparative advantage and comprehensive approach fostered by its three dimensions, namely Governmental, Parliamentary and Economic. Everyday activities linked to this operational method are handled by the CEI-Executive Secretariat (CEI-ES), with the annually rotating Presidency providing the general framework.

This working methodology is crucial in order to address the international context. The final aim is to promote multilateral activities that offer a joint strong operational approach towards European integration and sustainable development, placing focus on cohesion and solidarity, in particular among CEI EU and non-EU Member States. In practical terms, the CEI's main goal is to bring its Member States closer together in joint initiatives and encourage further regional cooperation in a structured and result oriented manner.

As regards the *Governmental Dimension*, this is done in the context of its structures, in particular the CEI high-level meetings and events, such as the annual Meetings of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and the Summits of the Heads of Government, as well as sectorial ministerial meetings or expert meetings. *The Parliamentary Dimension* focuses on the activities related to the promotion of cooperation among parliaments through its own structures, while *the Economic Dimension*, develops activities consisting in particular of meetings with the Chambers of Commerce of the CEI Member States and an annual CEI Economic Forum.

In combination with multilateral diplomacy, project cooperation allows for concrete results in areas where the CEI is uniquely suited to provide added value. The CEI channels its resources to project activities through the following funds and instruments:

- The *CEI Fund at the EBRD* - financed by the Italian Government - provides grant-type assistance for specific components of TC projects (prefeasibility and feasibility studies, project implementation, management training, capacity building and pre-loan audits in support of investments and operations of the EBRD). The Fund's main beneficiaries are the non-EU CEI Member States.
- The *CEI Fund at the EBRD* also contributes to the Know-how Exchange Programme (KEP). The KEP is a development instrument aimed at supporting the transfer of experience from organisations in the EU to peers in the non-EU countries within the CEI region through projects related to capacity building and transfer of good practices.
- The *CEI Cooperation Fund* - financed by annual contributions from all Member States - supports small-sized projects, such as seminars, workshops, conferences, training courses, aimed at fostering mobility and people-to-people contacts in the CEI region, in particular of the non-EU CEI Member States.
- In order to honour and encourage initiatives and activities of talented and often young people from the CEI Member States, several CEI Prizes & Awards are offered, in particular in the areas of culture and media.
- The CEI is also active in the field of EU project management. By participating in EU Projects, the CEI is able to achieve tangible results, enlarge its cooperation networks and ultimately contribute to the implementation of EU policies in the broad area covered by its membership. The CEI's ability to design and implement EU-funded projects, involving partner institutions from candidate, potential candidate and partner countries, is a major CEI asset allowing it to provide a tangible contribution to a wider European integration, and in particular to the enlargement process.

Strategic partnerships remain of utmost importance as well. In this context, strengthening relations with the EU and its institutions, the UN and its specialised agencies - deploying in this context on its Observer Status in the UN General Assembly - as well as with other international and regional organisations and international financial institutions, in order to foster both institutional and project-oriented partnerships based on solid mutual knowledge and synergies towards achieving the same goals, are considered a part of normal working practice.

Over the three decades of its existence, the CEI has established a wide outreach and a unique network of stakeholders and non-governmental actors. Capturing the vision of a connected, economically empowered and sustainable region, the CEI strives to include in the implementation of its activities not only the governmental level, but also public and private actors, such as enterprises, local actors, academia and civil society, also through a bottom-up approach. Thus, multi-stakeholder and multilevel partnerships remain equally significant.

The way forward

For a tangible implementation of its mission, the CEI will work on further strengthening its main assets.

With regard to the Governmental Dimension, it will continue to promptly address the challenges and provide guidelines for further actions, in particular through its high-level structures. Efforts will be made to enhance coordination between political dialogue and project-oriented activities. The annual work programmes, developed by the Presidency, in consultation with the CEI-ES - as its main operational arm - will take the guidelines included in the Plan of Action into account in order to ensure continuity between past, present and future activities, especially between the programmes of the current and the successive Presidencies. Herewith, a stronger role could also be played by the CEI Troika.

Activities related to the Parliamentary Dimension will continue to focus on the promotion of cooperation among parliaments. An intensified coordination between this dimension and the other dimensions, with the support of the CEI-ES, will be fostered. Complementary activities will be promoted, particularly in the framework of the structures of the Parliamentary Dimension. The knowledge sharing of best practices on specific matters will be also encouraged, including for example through organisation of bilateral meetings and exchange of views.

The Economic Dimension is not only an important supporting side activity, but is an enabler of the political mission and economic development, which is primary source of the final goal of all countries to prosper and increase the life quality of its citizens. Its strengths are the wide range of subjects to cover, from financial possibilities to strong, complex interlinkage with the intergovernmental and other dimensions, and to provide them with a platform where feasible business ideas can be discussed, investment opportunities examined, trade partnerships established and cooperation agreements signed, in particular through the annual Economic Forum. The aim of the Economic Dimension is, thus, to make recommendations for actions to create a more effective usage of available resources with the aim of strengthening economic dialogue and cooperation in the region, while boosting regional economic diplomacy among the Member States, through its own Strategy.

The CEI will also pursue an increased interaction and better coordination among its three dimensions, so as to allow for enhanced reciprocal information flows and knowledge as well as to strengthen the impact of CEI activities among them. To this end, strategies and work programmes developed within the three dimensions will play a main role in improving the coordination of work topics.

In addition, recognising the need to include a local perspective and the potential of young people among its activities, the CEI shall allow for a comprehensive multi-faceted approach that includes these two aspects in its work, through a launch of a fourth dimension "CEI Local Dimension" and a contribution towards the "CEI Youth Agenda".

In order to enhance the impact of CEI funds, instruments and cooperation tools, continuous monitoring of their functioning procedure, an integration and coordination within the overall CEI actions and more prioritisation in the management of available funds will be crucial elements, in particular for the implementation of projects with the financial support of these funds. The CEI will also increase its function as a project developer, in particular for the implementation of EU programmes, while promoting a joint participation of the CEI Member States in such programmes.

Moreover, as a trusted partner, the CEI will continue adding value to the multilateral component and to its countries as such by combining funds, knowledge and partnerships. This will be done in a flexible way, open to integrate relevant aspects linked to occurring challenges. The CEI will continue to be a reliable donor, but also a recipient by attracting both international expertise and resources from international financial institutions and development agencies for implementation of joint project in common areas, to the benefit of its Member States. As a knowledge provider, it will focus on the practical value of actions, the untapped potential of partnerships,

as well as identify lessons learnt and best practices to be replicated across the region and beyond. As a convener of partnerships, the CEI will promote dialogue and collaboration among diverse partners and stakeholders and seek to maximize the results, including through a bottom-up approach.

Acknowledging the crucial role of the CEI-ES in the day-to-day activities of the Organisation, the PoA should allow for its offering strategic guidance in the implementation of and fostering synergy between the multilateral component and project-oriented activities. The role of the Secretariat would then be to coordinate, monitor and evaluate the progress made under the political guidance of the Secretary General and his Alternate and Deputies as well as the incumbent Presidency, with the aim of capitalizing on the achieved results and performing better on lessons learned. In order to intensify cooperation, the CEI-ES will permanently communicate with national focal points on issues related to the implementation of the PoA.

To this end, the joint approach should aim to focus on a better-connected and modern region with higher level of economic and social cohesion. It should emphasise the need for overall security, resilient and sound economies, environmental sustainability and inclusive societies, fully taking into account the relevance of respecting democratic values, valorisation of the youth, as well as creating opportunities and diminishing disparities that pose obstacles to the ultimate goal of achieving a prosperous and secure region. In a nutshell, the document addresses all concepts contributing to a stable, sustainable and developed region that the CEI strives to achieve, while paying sufficient attention to emerging challenges as priorities on the political agenda.

The focus areas

To operationalise this approach, the CEI has developed a general agenda to articulate the strategic focus into specific goals and objectives covering the areas of cooperation agreed upon within the CEI Guidelines and Rules of Procedure.

With this agenda, the CEI intends to play an important role in supporting the further European integration process and the sustainable development as a source of global growth. In this context, the CEI will promote models for political and socio-economic integration that are green, economically sustainable, and resilient, as well as inclusive, by expanding its activities in social sectors, through integrated solutions. Therefore, for the upcoming period the focus will be placed on the following two mainstreams:

1. Fostering sustainable economies and raising climate awareness aimed at enhancing overall connectivity in the region and building climate resilience, while stimulating Green Growth.
2. Reducing inequalities and accelerating progress aimed at increasing the emphasis on social inclusion, thus promoting accountable institutions, citizens' rights and human development in line with the technological advancements, while building Just Societies.

II. CEI Agenda for 2021-2023

In the past years, the CEI has made great steps regarding the two-far reaching priorities, supporting European integration and promoting sustainable development of the CEI region. However, there are unfinished agendas. On one side, there are issues which remain to be addressed such as institutional transparency, migration challenges, changing demographics, rapid urbanisation, rising inequalities, climate change and growing environmental pressures, insufficient connectivity, with the COVID-19 pandemic in the first place. On the other, there are trends, such as technological advancements, international scientific cooperation, digitalisation, which present both opportunities, and challenges. Moreover, given the size of the region, the CEI has an opportunity to tangibly deliver on major global commitments underpinning the international development agenda, this way determining regional successes and future progress.

In this regard, the new PoA sets the course for the CEI's efforts to respond effectively to the current challenges and changing conditions. While taking into consideration the strategic documents of relevant institutions and international organisations, especially of the EU and the UN, it primarily builds on the political indications by the CEI governments on the occasion of the summits and ministerial meetings, held in the previous triannual period (2018-2020), and other relevant stakeholders' meetings and views, as well as on several assessments of its performance, both internal, and external:

1. The new Agenda reflects the feedback from a wide range of CEI stakeholders' meetings, as well as the CEI-ES views. Political indications have been provided to issues such as economic uncertainty, especially post COVID-19, pressing environmental issues, inefficient governance, including corruption, poor infrastructural links, demographic challenges, youth unemployment and local development. These issues should be further pursued in a more systematic manner. The CEI should also build on its strengths in financing and enhance its capacity in activities in the economic sector to help Member States address these challenges. Greater emphasis on the private sector and business in general, as well as on cooperation with international financial institutions, in order to respond to growing regional needs, was also suggested.
2. Based on the results in the implementation of the PoA 2018-2020, the new CEI Agenda - when setting up goals and objectives for the next years - should continue to operate building upon the past experience, while also taking into consideration the unpredictable events of global consequences that can affect political agenda of governments and international institutions (e.g. COVID-19 pandemic). Experience has also showed that a general framework of goals and objectives represents a practical way to address the complexity of issues in the region in a flexible manner. Moreover, the implementation reports of the past three years have demonstrated that most of the goals and objectives of the previous PoA have been tackled in a balanced way – in terms of numbers of implemented projects and activities - but have a different weight in terms of type of activities and related financial requests. Yet, this seems justified as the activities in different sectors call for different levels of financial support. Moreover, regarding certain goals, activities are focused on governmental cooperation, while for others, the CEI is predominantly working within a multi-level and multi-stakeholder framework, thus cooperating with various actors such as public and private institutions, NGOs, universities, regional and international organisations and others, depending on the nature of the project.
3. Finally, a deep external assessment of the CEI performance vis-à-vis the implementation of the UN Agenda 2030 and its 17 SDGs has showed that the CEI has well aligned its operations with the Agenda and has so far generated positive results in economic areas such as infrastructure and innovation. However, the findings also indicated that the CEI could increase its focus on social sectors to strengthen its support to inclusive have economic growth and reducing inequalities. The findings, furthermore, suggested that the CEI should pursue better quality of growth through mutually-reinforcing agendas of social and geographical

inclusion, as well as environmental sustainability, and thus promote them through an integrated approach in the activities. The assessment also suggested that, given its long-standing experience, the CEI could even better integrate its expertise across sectors and themes to address more complex development challenges. This way, the CEI could further strengthen its knowledge services and knowledge sharing across countries.

Along these lines, the CEI will expand its activities in social sectors, in particular for vulnerable groups which are often excluded due to race, ethnicity, religion, age, educational background, sexual orientation or disability status, gender identity, pursuing at the same time a sustainable economic growth, through a holistic approach. Therefore, with the aim of better meeting the focus areas, the following goals and objectives, which are interlinked, interdependent and represent the main areas of interest of the CEI Member States, as outlined in the CEI Guidelines and Rules of Procedure, have been identified and shall be implemented in a cooperative approach:

Goal 1: Stimulating Green Growth

In order to stimulate green growth, the CEI will address the following objectives, ensuring that economic development is pursued in a sustainable, resource efficient manner, through a higher level of connectivity in all its forms, including transport, energy and digital, as an important prerequisite for enhanced harmonisation of the entrepreneurial environment:

Objective 1.1: Strengthening Transport Networks

As international trade and human mobility remain a catalyst for investments and economic growth, a well-developed, connected and modern, as well as environmentally-friendly transport system, sustainably linking various transport modes, while also reducing greenhouse gas emissions, is essential to enhance countries' trade, tourism and overall competitiveness, as well as raise the quality of life in the region. Given that the necessity to improve the transport infrastructure is especially valid for countries whose economic growth is trade and/or tourism dependent, there is the need to continuously improve the links between their gateways and extend their connections to both the region and globally. In this regard, the CEI will continue to promote digital and green transport corridors, green ports, intermodal terminals policies and services for people's mobility, thus contributing to a better integration and improvement of connections in the region. Additionally, the need to improve border crossings and speed up border-crossing procedures represents a key factor for the enhancement of the transport efficiency in the CEI area: bottlenecks at border crossings are still an often-neglected component of transport networks causing long delays in transiting international borders, hampering the transportation of goods as well as the mobility of citizens and causing unfavourable effects on the environment and health, as much as on tourism. Tackling the above-mentioned issues - in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak - becomes even more important. Border crossing facilitation actions, including adaptation to digital technologies, automation of custom procedures and goods origin confirmation, small-scale investments, harmonization of national legislations and control technologies, innovative organizational solutions as well as implementation of other soft measures will significantly support the improvement of transport network efficiency in the CEI area. Furthermore, the CEI will promote sustainable transport systems and solutions, also through integration of public transport services in cross-border/rural/peripheral areas and improved access to vulnerable groups in main transport networks, which would in turn lead to a sound trade policy and inclusive growth conducive to favourable entrepreneurial environment.

Objective 1.2: Boosting Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Knowledge-based societies with sound economic potential require investing in strong research and innovation (eco-) systems within a broad multi-stakeholder (i.e. quadruple/quintuple-helix) framework, aiming to foster job creation and creativity. In this context, the CEI will support policy development encouraging research, including youth policy, innovation and entrepreneurship towards the creation of innovative start-ups and micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, as well as fostering the implementation processes of needed instruments and mechanisms aimed to increase pragmatic interest of SMEs towards the promotion of research and innovation and to enhance their investments in scientific domains. It will also promote open science as a tool for supporting openness, transparency and research integrity. To this end, the CEI will continue to act as a platform for policy dialogue and knowledge circulation, as well as for facilitating the design of joint actions in fields such as capacity building, benchmarking and technology transfer with focus on youth. Technological innovations in the CEI Member States with a focus on digital solutions and development of artificial intelligence technologies will also be taken into account. In order to make sure that industrial challenges are properly met by scientific and technological solutions, particular attention will be paid to research-industry collaborations, which will be facilitated through open and demand-driven innovation able to ensure valorisation of research results, transfer of knowledge and know-how. With the aim to decouple the economic growth from environmental degradation, while at the same time ensuring the continuous increase of the quality of lives of citizens, the CEI will promote activities linked to upgrading the technological capacities of the industrial sector and increasing scientific knowledge research capacity in resource efficient models and bio-based technologies, also promoting activities related to green and blue growth. Moreover, environmental factors, including climate change, as well as the risk to lose the ability in protecting against infectious diseases (e.g. COVID-19), require investing in research, technology and innovation to overcome those health challenges. Thus, activities facilitating the development of solutions will be promoted by the CEI.

Objective 1.3: Enhancing Climate Resilience

As climate change is increasing the frequency and intensity of extreme climate and weather events that are affecting all countries around the globe, building climate resilience by integrating climate change strategies and action is of utmost importance. Global warming, due to anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions, pollutants and other greenhouse gases causing the greenhouse effect, has reached the highest level in history, resulting in extreme weather events and dramatically changing the landscape, including thawing permafrost. Over the recent years, the CEI region itself has experienced a significant increase in the number of floods, droughts and heat waves. Key environmental issues and natural disasters the region is facing also include air pollution, water pollution and stress, marine litter, earthquakes, inadequate waste management, deforestation, land degradation, and biodiversity loss. Growing climate and environmental pressures pose challenges to sustainability and exacerbate existing vulnerabilities of the poor, who depend disproportionately on ecosystem services for their livelihoods and food security. Aside from having differential impacts on people and communities within countries, if left untackled, climate hazards will increase poverty, worsen inequalities, food insecurity and cause health problems, which may reverse years of development progress in some countries. Considering the impact on daily life, the CEI will consider this concept from a comprehensive point of view, starting from early childhood education, to favouring local actions encouraging cultural habits of all segments of population, towards durable sustainable behaviour, to exchanging experience among the Member States in combating climate change. In this regard, it will promote developing and strengthening policies aimed at joining the global fight to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, as well as support the setting up of institutions for effective climate change and disaster risk-related monitoring, planning and management, and building capacities that will

foster climate change resilience. Furthermore, activities aimed at the efficient use and preservation of natural resources and biodiversity will be promoted by the CEI.

Objective 1.4: Promoting Clean Energy

The inefficient use of natural resources, the resource-intensive sectors, as well as the abundant consumption of various inadequate energy sources is threatening economic security, producing atmospheric gases, especially carbon dioxide, resulting in the creation of the greenhouse effect. In order to address climate change, countries need to adapt and become resilient to its current and future impacts and foster public and private investments in clean energy and low-emission technologies, as well as in smart infrastructure for clean energy transition and green energy storage systems. Reflection on the promotion of larger energy connectivity, including new energy supply routes among the Member States, will be considered. Energy supply and demand will have to focus more on energy-efficient methods and make a greater use of renewable energy sources. In this context, enhancing international cooperation is essential for promoting clean energy research and technology, including renewable energy, energy efficiency, low carbon energy sources and advanced and cleaner fossil-fuel technology, as well as smart energy systems, and the putting into place of regulatory mechanisms for renewable energy. Bioenergy appears to be the most promising target for at least two reasons: a) the huge amount of organic by-products provided by agriculture and forestry-related activities, and b) the possibility for countries to use conventional technologies which cannot count on a highly-developed energy industry. In this framework, the CEI wishes to act as a platform for the adoption of sustainable-development-related policies, to strengthen cooperation among Member States and support measures to facilitate investments and enhance dissemination and information in this field. In particular, priority is given to the industry and the housing sector (energy performance of buildings and buildings with almost zero energy consumption), and to the transport sector, by supporting activities in sustainable mobility, i.e. promoting environmentally-friendly transport, with focus on optimisation of urban mobility, in view of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and of raising the quality of life in urban areas. While encouraging its countries to take action for an irreversible shift towards clean energy sources, the CEI will advocate for measures that could mitigate the negative socio-economic effects this process could entail in specific areas or population groups, thus leaving no one behind. Furthermore, the CEI will support mechanisms for preventing the risk of carbon leakage, halting the loss of biodiversity and protecting the environment in line with the European Green Deal.

Objective 1.5: Supporting Circular Economy

Decades of increased production have led to pressure on the living environment at the expense of water and soil quality, biodiversity, ecosystem services and the climate – among others. To prevent further depletion and over-exploitation of the Earth's limited resources, a system change is necessary. Yet, instead of focusing solely on reducing the cost of production, there is a need to shift the mindset towards overusing natural resources, and thus reduce the use of raw materials, through their more efficient use within cycles, while also furthering countries' economy and changing people's attitude towards consumption and waste. In order to ensure the maintenance of a high level of competitiveness and supply solutions contributing to a sustainable management of natural resources and continuous economic growth, the CEI wishes to promote activities aimed at a rethinking of the way of producing and consuming by adopting a circular approach. Such an approach may also open up an accelerated transition to green technologies and services. A transition to circular economy holds major potential in this regard and may potentially improve both the environment and the competitiveness of enterprises. Moreover, circular economy represents a clear option for expanding, among others, the bioeconomy, sustainable construction and resource-efficient production. Bioeconomy is in particular a very important part of the circular economy. Its cross-cutting nature brings about an opportunity to address complex

and inter-linked issues, while fostering innovation and entrepreneurship, and thus enhancing competitiveness and growth. Knowledge exchange among various stakeholders to transform the increased demand of biomass into sustainable solutions in the entire value chain - from biomass to bio-based products and to the consumer – ought to be encouraged. In this regard, the CEI will sustain its countries' efforts to develop strategies and tools to promote the use of renewable and sustainable feedstocks for materials and energy. One possible direction could be to sustain the gradual shift from fossil-based to wood-based materials, thus emphasising the carbon-sequestration potentials of sustainably managed forests in achieving circular economy in the CEI region. Thereby, based on its experience and achievements, the CEI will support the definition of bioeconomy strategies in CEI Member States, including the creation of regional biomass markets and the promotion of corridors for sustainable mobilisation of biomass and by-products. Moreover, rethinking the waste management systems in the CEI Member States under the principles of circular economy, waste minimisation and development of innovations in waste processing, will be promoted.

Objective 1.6: Encouraging Smart Communities

Rapid urbanisation and population shift from rural to urban areas, often linked to economic opportunities, is a trend faced by some countries in the CEI region. However, as cities have come under increasing pressure from an influx of people, the demands for essential services have stretched the cities' resources. Moreover, rapid urbanisation has escalated problems such as inequality, unemployment, crime, climate change and has put at risk the health of citizens, as the experience with COVID-19 has demonstrated. Thus, the challenge is to transform specific areas where people live in rural environments, as well as in isolated and underdeveloped conditions into smart and liveable places, in order to help these areas meet economic, environmental and social challenges and improve the quality of life in line with technological advancements. Particular attention should be paid to the delivery of modern digital services in rural areas for the benefit of the population living there, thus preventing the risk of a digital divide. Furthermore, improving market connectivity of these areas and agricultural value chain linkages is needed. In this context, the CEI will promote activities aimed at enhancing sustainable agricultural development so as to improve farm efficiency and competitiveness, increase farm incomes, food security; improve information sharing, promote the use of associated technologies in the sector. It will also promote the access to suitable infrastructure and services, including the provision of high-quality and availability of drinking water, and the development of adequate waste and wastewater treatment facilities and housing communal services. Moreover, since agriculture depends on ecosystem services and has an important impact on these ecosystems, it is worth underlining the importance of using environmental-friendly agriculture practices in accordance with the principles of the Circular Economy and increased resource-use efficiency. Attention will also be paid to further developing rural tourism, as well as to developing new and enhancing existing tourism offers/local products with the aim of keeping the population in these areas. In addition, social economy, which is crucial for the convergence of disadvantaged regions, where market forces fail to revive the economy, will also be promoted. Social enterprises and cooperatives are key actors in social inclusion and work integration in these regions. However, they face many common barriers for their set up, operation and growth. Therefore, support mechanisms tailored to local needs and specificities of social businesses are necessary and will be further promoted by the CEI.

Goal 2: Building Just Societies

In order to build just societies aimed at reducing inequalities and accelerating progress, the CEI will address the following objectives by promoting accountable institutions, citizens' rights and human development coupled with technological advancements such as digitalisation, conducive to social inclusion and shared prosperity for all:

Objective 2.1: Advancing Good Governance

Good governance and strong institutional capacity are the basis for European integration and sustainable development. In this regard, the CEI will promote activities to help improve governance by strengthening the quality and capacity of public institutions to undertake policy reforms, as well as promote the private sector and horizontal inclusion of diverse actors of society in searching for the best solutions that contribute to long-term stability and sustainability. Multi-level approaches and the involvement of different actors allow for shared long-term development policies and programmes, properly harmonised and inclusive. Bringing together democratic values, the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights, a good governance requires a transparent and accountable state organisation, laying out the basis for inclusive societies, where local administrations are provided with adequate skills and means. The CEI recognises that regional sustainable development requires gender equality through the strengthening of women's leadership and political participation in all levels of a policy-making process – local, national, regional and global, by removing barriers for equal participation and ensuring women's fair access to all political spheres. Thus, the CEI will promote activities to remove all kinds of discriminatory provisions and growing inequalities, favouring gender equality and enhancing the participation of vulnerable groups in the public life. Moreover, managing issues such as migration, demographic distress, rapid urbanisation, health challenges, natural and manmade disasters etc., calls for effective governance. However, poor public services, weak government institutions and corruption are still present in the countries. Therefore, the CEI will support governance reforms to eradicate corruption and organised crime, promote the rule of law and increase public services, in particular their digitalisation in the field of e-government, administrative procedures and electronic documents, as well as the promotion of public procurement practices and open data. In this context, activities aimed at promoting the use of digital technologies across institutional operations, including developing transparency policies and a regulatory framework for the digital economy and society, expanding internet connectivity for all, fostering green transition and thereof related investments, will also be pursued. The importance of data security (cybersecurity) will also be stressed, since a more secure and resilient digital environment requires a wider risk assessment and suitable system of processing and analysis of internal and external security data sources. Furthermore, analysis and actions on demographic changes and brain drain will be taken into account. Tackling the root causes of migration will also be supported. Also, the development of cooperation for preventing and eliminating emergency situations, comprising comprehensive monitoring and rapid warning mechanisms for emergencies in transboundary territories of the CEI, will be promoted.

Objective 2.2: Fostering Better Health

Recent challenges pertaining to climate change, environmental pollution, demographic changes, energy and water security, and non-communicable and infectious diseases have put the health of citizens at serious risks, which was particularly confirmed with the spread of the COVID-19. Therefore, collective actions to mitigate their negative effects to health are necessary. This will require greater regional cooperation in areas such as disaster risk financing, efficient health policies, improved sanitary and phytosanitary standards. In particular, strengthening the capacity for early warning, risk reduction and management of health risks, a weakness which became obvious with the COVID-19, should be tackled. In this context, the CEI will promote activities related to the preparedness mechanisms in response to health emergencies and their eradication, as well as to the readiness in addressing different persistent and emerging health issues, thus strengthening the capacity of the CEI Member States' health care systems in preparedness and response to global pandemics including the COVID-19. In this regard, development of cooperation of the CEI Member States institutions aimed at sharing experience and best practices will be pursued. In addition, actions aimed at achieving better health for all will be also promoted with the main aim of fostering sustainable health systems. These will include activities aimed

at promoting reforms of health-care systems, improving the quality and coverage of health-care services, ensuring access to quality health-care services to all, especially to vulnerable groups of people. It will also promote the greater use of innovative and smart health service delivery systems, taking advantage of technological developments, such as telemedicine. Given the strong impact of health on all aspects of society, activities aimed at providing science-based information and encouraging cultural habits through a multidimensional and cross-sectoral approach, will also be promoted. Furthermore, as ensuring healthy lives and well-being is essential to sustainable development, the CEI will promote activities aimed at maintaining a normal, active, and healthy life at all ages, also by increasing participation in sport and health-enhancing physical activities. Collective actions, through cross-sectoral cooperation, can ensure the awareness of other policy domains of the important contribution that sport can make to socially- and environmentally-sustainable growth, digitalisation as well as recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and future resilience, as well as to achieve the SDGs.

Objective 2.3: Supporting Intercultural Cooperation

The CEI region enjoys remarkable cultural treasures, resources and values which play a major role in shaping its identity. Promoting intercultural dialogue and the respect for diversity of cultures and arts remains a CEI priority. Strengthening core values such as mutual understanding presents an effective approach to preventing cultural, linguistic and ethnic divisions as well as to enabling people to deal with different identities constructively and democratically. The CEI will pay particular attention to cultural policies to foster intercultural dialogue, preserve the cultural and linguistic identity of minority groups and ensure equal access to culture. In this regard, an active inclusion of all groups of the society in the cultural life and the promotion of design for all principles - recognised at international level which consists in designing any service or product for addressing the possible range of human abilities, skills, requirements, and preferences, promoting inclusion and accessibility - is necessary. Recognising the indispensable role cultural heritage and creative industries (CCIs) play in achieving inclusive and sustainable development and the contribution of culture in strengthening relationships and enhancing social progress, through job creation and competitiveness, the CEI will continue to support actions and activities aimed at the preservation and innovative management of cultural heritage in the region and in support of CCIs. Aside from their significant role in economic development, CCIs have built a bridge between arts, culture, business and technology with huge potential to foster inclusive growth and support social cohesion. The CEI will support policies and programme strategies for national, regional and local initiatives bringing together grassroots networks and professional associations, universities, museums, archaeological sites, national, regional and local authorities, and a wide range of associations and socio-economic actors. Moreover, bearing in mind that international cultural relations represent the cornerstone of European diversity and recognising the great potential of the CEI region in terms of cultural treasures, values and artistic creations, the promotion and support of such activities remain a priority for the upcoming years as well. The CEI will also foster cultural diplomacy as a form of soft power and normative tool building upon a positive vision of cultural diversity, constant promotion of knowledge of other cultures and building understanding between different communities. The CEI will thus encourage joint participation in transnational projects, initiatives and other networks of mutual interest promoting the cultural values of each country, in light of the key role cultural diplomacy plays in strengthening state relations, enhancing socio-cultural cooperation and promoting their image, their history and their national interests.

Objective 2.4: Safeguarding Media Freedom

Open and free media landscape with divergent opinions and ideas is a key aspect of sustainable and inclusive societies. Freedom of expression as an essential fundamental right can only be exercised in a free and pluralistic

media environment, through an independent media governance. Maintaining media pluralism as well as safeguarding independence are essential conditions for preserving the right to information and freedom of expression that underpins the democratic society. Media freedom has recently come under the spotlight, in particular as regards the COVID-19 pandemic. As it continues to have significant consequences for public health, social wellbeing and the economy, the crisis also presents a significant threat to media freedom leading to false or manipulated information on the spread of COVID-19, thus putting people's lives at risk. In this regard, the CEI strives to combat the proliferation of disinformation not only related to the pandemic, but also to every aspect of the society, including hate speech. The CEI also strives to promote and protect media pluralism, transparency and independence, especially with regard to the legal framework guaranteeing these principles. A continuous debate, monitoring and awareness raising with the involvement of different segments of the society is required and, therefore, the CEI will act as a platform for implementing appropriate activities in this respect. Priority will also be given to increasing the level of media literacy in CEI Member States, considering that the major transformation of the media environment resulting from numerous reasons, including technological advancements, requires adequate skills and competencies and as a response to the proliferation of fake news, which pose serious risks to the freedom of expression, the independence of the media, the quality of public debates, and the participation of citizens in the political life of their country. As such, the CEI will work to ensure effective self-regulatory mechanisms based on the principles of accuracy and transparency, and create the proper conditions and instruments in relation to source verification by independent and impartial, certified third-party fact-checking organisations to assure the objectivity of information and its protection. Critical questions linked to the use of Internet and digital media, especially its legal and ethical dimensions, will also be at the core of CEI cooperation in this field. Special attention will be paid to the support of professional training to promote the highest standards in journalism in order to fulfil its role in democratic societies also with respect to vulnerable groups.

Objective 2.5: Pursuing People Empowerment

Regional efforts should be reinforced in the field of people empowerment, especially of women and youth as a contribution to an inclusive and sustainable development. The CEI will continue fostering education at all levels and improving the learning outcomes for all, thus empowering youth and supporting lifelong learning and training opportunities, by also fostering gender equality and enhancing the participation of women and other vulnerable groups. Moreover, the CEI will continue to promote the enhancing of entrepreneurial literacy through education and training, particularly for vulnerable groups, recognising in particular the potential of youth, women and minorities in playing a significant role in innovative and knowledge-driven entrepreneurship. Thus, the CEI will work on the further promotion of women's potential through education, skill development and employment, contributing to the elimination of illiteracy, economic independence, and to creating better conditions within the labour market. As the role of young people is crucial for sustainable development, the CEI will further promote youth engagement, by fostering mobility and exchange, as well as formal and non-formal education and training. It will also assist in using digital solutions to provide quality education and training to anyone, anywhere and anytime, which has become particularly important in the time of the spread of COVID-19. In this context, activities focused on improved digital literacy and soft skills, and technical and vocational education and training will be promoted. The advent of technology has changed the landscape in education institutions and technology-enhanced courses are becoming the norm. The CEI will continue to support the modernisation of education and training systems, in order to strengthen the digital competences of the society and make employees successful in the quickly changing labour market. Challenges posed by demographic changes, rapid technological development, require better performance of education and training systems and highly-skilled people on both sides, students and teachers. One of the emerging delivery modes is blended learning which combines the advantages of technology, enhanced face-to-face instruction, at distance when

needed and electronically supported learning. Furthermore, the interplay between innovation, knowledge and entrepreneurship constitutes a major driver of the economic, social and cultural development in modern societies and has major implications for public policy. In order to increase capacities of the labour force and enhance employability, cooperation between education, academic and research institutions and employers (private and public bodies) shall also be fostered. In particular, the activities will aim at promoting the dissemination of the concept and contemporary methodologies in the field of lifelong learning, including vocational training and adult education, and training for innovation, economic growth and job creation.

Objective 2.6: Furthering Science Diplomacy

In front of complex, science-driven issues and challenges, the CEI will strengthen its role as a forum combining multilateral diplomacy and science, by providing a platform for result-oriented cooperation encouraging interactions among scientists, diplomats and policymakers. By building bridges between communities, societies, and nations through closer science-policy-diplomacy connections, the CEI will elevate the role of science in foreign policy to address national, bilateral, regional and global challenges, including the attainment of the SDGs. The CEI will explore the concept of science diplomacy further, through actions such as trainings, capacity building, research, exchange of best practices, mobility schemes and networking, so that each Member State will take full advantage of this emerging tool and use it to multiply its opportunities in the field of international cooperation. As the recent outbreak of COVID-19 has demonstrated, solutions for global problems often require merging political, economic and scientific actors, skills and perspectives. Recognising the importance of science when addressing contemporary transnational challenges, the CEI will keep providing diplomatic support to the establishment of science-policy-diplomacy interfaces on topics such as climate change mitigation and adaptation, including disaster risk reduction, health, green and blue growth, acting as a facilitator of science diplomacy and supporting access to scientific information across its region. Moreover, it will promote collaborative research networks/scientific panels on topics of common interest, as well as regional initiatives for the establishment of new research infrastructures and the valorisation of existing ones, including their mapping, and supporting their interoperability through the mobility of representatives of science and industry, taking into account their importance in bridging political and developmental divides. The dialogue between stakeholders of the research and innovation ecosystem and diplomacy will contribute to the promotion of trusted scientific data while building more resilient societies.