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The EU sugar industry: facing challenges, supporting a just transition

During today's Sugar Social Dialogue meeting, the Social Partners EFFAT and CEFS had the opportunity to present the European Commission with the measures undertaken at factory level to protect workers, keep the production running and help the fight against the coronavirus pandemic throughout Europe. In a dedicated roundtable, members of the two organisations shared their experiences of working and of social dialogue in times of a pandemic. Examples included health and safety measures put in place in the factories, as well as the contribution from the beet sugar sector to the production of alcohol for disinfecting gel. Workers having been classified as "essential" and continued working throughout the pandemic, the sector thereby proved once again that, thanks to the many outlets of the beets, it was of crucial importance, especially in times of crisis.

In addition, the impact of Brexit presents another challenge to the EU sugar sector. Participants discussed the shared history of the EU's and UK's sugar markets and reflected on the key elements of the bilateral sugar trade today. Looking ahead, they noted a clear risk for the EU and the UK to lose substantial export volumes. In a no-deal scenario the food and beverage sector will be disproportionately affected. It would lead to major disruptions and job losses in the UK as well as in a number of Member States. EFFAT and CEFS ask EU negotiators to do all possible to come to a free trade agreement and ensure a level playing field for European producers and workers.

In order to partially answer the many challenges faced by the EU sugar industry, EFFAT and CEFS are currently conducting an EU-funded project, which aims at helping the Social Partners to further develop a competitive, innovative and sustainable vision of the sector, leading the transition towards a post-petroleum society while decoupling economic growth from resource depletion and negative environmental and social impacts. The project is running from March 2020 until October 2021. Social Partners are willing to move towards a sustainable future, from an environmental and social perspective. The transition should be just and inclusive, leaving no one behind, and it should create economic growth, build a predictable environment for investment and ensure qualitative employment.