

Annual meeting of the Presidents and Secretaries-General of the national Economic and Social Councils and of the European Economic and Social Committee

Final declaration

The involvement of the social partners and organised civil society in the Europe 2020 strategy

Brussels Declaration – 16 September 2010

The presidents and secretaries-general of the economic and social councils (ESCs) of the Member States and the European Economic and Social Committee met in Brussels on 16 September 2010 to initiate joint discussions on *the involvement of the social partners and other representative organisations of civil society in the new EU 2020 strategy*, and adopted the following declaration. It follows on from the contributions made by the EESC and the various national ESCs, not least in the March 2010 summary report, submitted to the last Spring Council. This declaration is based on the replies to a questionnaire sent to the presidents and secretaries-general relating to the involvement of civil society and the social partners in the E2020 Strategy.

I. Facing a crisis and major challenges

- 1.1 The economic situation has been slow to stabilise, with the financial and banking crisis deteriorating into a severe economic and social crisis characterised by weak growth, significant job losses and government finance problems in several Member States. The presidents and secretaries-general are particularly concerned about the situation on the labour market, which remains extremely strained, and about the continuing economic and social impact of the crisis on businesses and workers.
- 1.2 At a time when the European Union is undergoing a crisis on a scale unseen since the Second World War, the people of the EU are also facing significant long-term challenges with regard, just by way of example, to the globalisation of the economy, more and better jobs, strengthening social cohesion, improving the internal market, energy policy and climate change, demographic change and migration.
- 1.3 Of course, the Member States all have their own identities, and have not been equally affected by the crisis, but the presidents and secretaries-general are nonetheless convinced that both the current problems and the future challenges are shared by all and can only be tackled together, by the joint efforts of the peoples of Europe.

II. The Europe 2020 strategy at the heart of the European project

- 2.1 Despite the current situation, the presidents and secretaries-general have no doubt that, now more than ever, European integration needs to form a positive, inspiring and forward-looking project for the peoples within the European Union and for those who aspire to join.

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- 2.2 At the European Council in June 2010, the European Union adopted a new general framework for economic, social and environmental reform over the next ten years, setting five headline targets to help the EU to make progress over the coming decade in the fields of employment, innovation, research and development, climate change and energy, education, and reducing poverty. This new strategy puts greater responsibility on the Member States, which have undertaken to set national objectives to determine their contribution – taking account of where they are starting from – to achieving the EU's headline targets. Governance will be strengthened: the strategy will be steered at European Council level, and the progress made in achieving the headline targets will be assessed at regular intervals.

III. The Lisbon Strategy: ten years of experience with involvement

- 3.1 Within the Member States, there are considerable variations in relationships between the social partners, in the involvement of organised civil society and in the design of the political decision-making structures, but in general the activities of the national ESCs appear to be increasingly connected to the issue of European integration and the commitments it imposes.
- 3.2 With the Lisbon Strategy, the challenge for the social partners and other representative organisations of civil society was to find their niche in a huge and complex strategy. The national ESCs all made considerable efforts, using their own resources and operating procedures, to get involved in the Lisbon Strategy, even though circumstances still vary between countries.
- 3.3 The presidents and secretaries-general are keen to stress how beneficial the creation of the EESC's Lisbon Strategy Observatory has been. This observatory brings together the national ESCs within the EESC on a regular basis to discuss issues relating to the Lisbon Strategy, and has been a particularly valuable tool in terms of the exchange of information and ownership practices between national ESCs. They hope that this tool for cooperation will continue to develop its activities in keeping with the new Europe 2020 strategy.
- 3.4 Nonetheless, the presidents and secretaries-general feel that, despite the effort made and the progress achieved, the Lisbon Strategy never gained wide enough recognition from the general public; it struggled to get society as a whole on board, which led, in general, to a lack of involvement on the part of the social partners and other representative organisations of civil society.
- 3.5 In the light of experience gained over ten years of implementing the Lisbon Strategy, they would emphasise that it is imperative to give the strategy for growth and jobs greater legitimacy and visibility. At European and national level, there is also a need, within the context of the social market economy, to reinforce the information, consultation and/or negotiation interfaces of which the ESCs are a varied part, in order to ensure that the various elements of society can be made aware of and involved in the challenges facing us effectively and democratically. We need to capitalise on the potential offered by European integration, not to establish a single European social model to replace national models, but to strengthen the capacity of those national models to adapt to circumstances and to protect citizens from risks they are not able to bear individually.

IV. Europe 2020: a need for greater involvement

4.1 The European Union is in the process of launching a new strategy for its economic, social and environmental development over the next ten years, and in this context the presidents and secretaries-general would stress that it is absolutely vital to develop, as part of the Europe 2020 strategy, a system of governance that will allow the social partners and other representative organisations of civil society to be more closely involved. This will make it possible to respond immediately and practically to the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, and in particular of Article 11, §§ 1 to 3.

4.2 If the European Union is to achieve the objectives it has set itself, businesses, workers and European citizens in general – as well as the organisations and institutions that represent them – need to be real, relevant stakeholders in the process of convergence and integration set in motion by the immense political projects of socioeconomic reform and sustainable development.

The presidents and secretaries-general are pleased with the considerations of the Belgian presidency of the Council on employment following the informal Council of Employment Ministers on 8 July 2010, which reaffirms, *inter alia*, the need for a stronger and more effective involvement of the social partners in carrying out the Europe strategy 2020, both at European and national level.

4.3 The policies implemented under the Europe 2020 strategy should help to improve living conditions for all of the European Union's citizens. In order to be properly understood, the reforms these policies introduce need to combine both a solid European framework and a balanced model of cooperation between all elements of society and the parties concerned at all levels of decision making.

4.4 Social dialogue and macroeconomic dialogue, and dialogue with civil society in more general terms, are key elements in a balanced pursuit of objectives in terms of both structural reforms and macroeconomic policy. This essentially involves responding, via the interactions developed within the ESCs and elsewhere, to the needs of a strong, globalised economy and to the desire of European citizens to have access to high-quality jobs, pleasant and healthy living conditions and other factors in socio-economic integration.

4.5 This dialogue needs to be undertaken at all levels: European, national, regional and local. In order for this project to be a success, it is vital to optimise policy coordination between the international, Community and national levels, and the interfaces between the European and national dimensions need to be constantly improved. National or European public consultation is certainly an improvement, but it puts the individual citizen on the same footing as non-democratically-elected organisations and bodies that have democratic legitimacy for their actions.

4.6 European social dialogue is recognised in the Treaty, but in practice it needs to be put in a stronger position at the various stages of the institutional process. The views of the social

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partners should be seen as important in both the framing and implementation of policies based on recommendations and coordination. They are consulted to only a limited extent under the open methods of coordination set up by the Commission in social policy, such as retirement or employment policy (with the exception of the tripartite social summit, which should be more closely based on the initiatives of the president of the European Council).

- 4.7 The Europe 2020 strategy introduces new governance principles, which require everyone to understand the Community approach and its context, as well as national and regional diversity. This diversity will now need to be taken more into account and better managed at all decision-making levels, involving all the stakeholders and coordinating their action. In this connection, setting national objectives to match up with the direction the European Union is taking should alleviate some of these concerns and remedy many of the failings of the past.
- 4.8 The presidents and secretaries-general advocate improving coordination between the thrusts of national reform programmes and stability and growth programmes, leading in future to the social partners and other representative organisations of civil society being more appropriately involved in the various consultation procedures.

V. Options for closer involvement

- 5.1 The work undertaken by the EESC and the national ESCs within the Lisbon Strategy Observatory and in drafting this statement has shown that, despite national differences, there are certain common elements that could facilitate, or even be a decisive factor in, the involvement of the social partners and other representative organisations of civil society in European policy.

These elements relate to:

- the clarity and comprehensibility of the European strategy

- 5.2 The presidents and secretaries-general would draw attention to the importance of making a particular effort to ensure that European policies are clear and comprehensible: the strategy that the European Union is currently pursuing is extremely complex in regulatory and institutional terms, and it is crucial to achieve greater clarity regarding the policies being pursued and the instruments associated with these policies if we are to take effective ownership of the objectives set by the strategy. Furthermore, the legitimacy of the European institutions could not fail to be improved by greater transparency and coordination in the discussions held within, for example, the European committees (Economic Policy Committee, Economic and Financial Committee, Employment Committee, Social Protection Committee).

- the systematic involvement of the ESCs in the strategy

- 5.3 A number of ESCs are already very much involved in the institutional fabric of social dialogue and/or consultation on European topics within their own countries. Depending on the situation, these participation procedures are organised by law or by ad hoc and/or one-off methods. Certain ESCs prefer to use formal or informal channels for dialogue with the public

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authorities, especially going through the national Lisbon Strategy coordinator, while others have organised the stakeholders within a sustainable development observatory. In some cases, regular informal hearings are arranged with, for example, ministers, delegations from parliaments, the Permanent Representation to the EU, representatives in the European committees or members of ministerial private offices. These various forms of involving the economic and social councils are part of the whole structure of existing systems for involving and consulting the economic and social partners.

- 5.4 **Within the framework of the systems of participation and consultation in which the ESCs play their role, and bearing in mind the diversity of procedures, the presidents and secretaries-general of the national ESCs wish to reaffirm their wish to be involved, in accordance with their specific powers and the practices established in each country, in the preparation of the political positions defended by their country on the European scene and the arrangements for applying the European rules. This is particularly necessary as regards the various coordination processes included in the national reform programmes, the Member States' broad economic policy guidelines, the employment guidelines and the open method of coordination in social affairs.**

– access to information

- 5.5 One of the recurring requests is that the ESCs be informed in good time of issues, initiatives and assessments relating to the strategy. If communication functioned properly the parties concerned would be able to defend their interests or intervene concerning the line taken in the texts, even right from the initial phases of consultation.

– organising true dialogue with the social partners and organised civil society

- 5.6 Another key factor in encouraging the stakeholders in the strategy to participate would appear to be for the public authorities to organise true dialogue at key points in the strategy, enabling the national ESCs to influence the political decision-making process. It is also important to promote a culture of gathering opinions in order to get the national ESCs more involved.

– setting realistic consultation timetables

- 5.7 In many cases, the schedules for European activities are not widely known and the consultation deadlines are too short to allow the ESCs to agree on a position in good time under the planned procedures. The presidents and secretaries-general would emphasise that, if they are to be properly involved, it is essential that they be able to look at the provisional versions of texts before they are adopted by the political authorities and to make their contributions in good time.

– exchange of information and best practice between ESCs

- 5.8 The ESCs would highlight the benefit they gain from exchanging experience and best practice relating to their participation in implementing European policy. The importance of tools such as the current Lisbon Strategy Observatory and CESLink needs to be brought into line with the new system of governance for the strategy. The contributions submitted by the national ESCs, briefly setting out the difficulties they have encountered with the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy, their best practices and their proposals for ownership, are an important source of information and will be placed online so as to be accessible via CES Link.

The presidents and secretaries-general fully support these various approaches to increasing the involvement of social partners and other representative organisations of civil society in the Europe 2020 strategy, and would like to reiterate their support for a structure within the EESC modelled on the Lisbon Strategy Observatory, adapted to meet the needs of the new Europe 2020 strategy. The exchange of information within the framework of this structure could, in the long term, describe in greater detail the actions of the social partners and other representative organisations of civil society in the various countries and thus make their involvement in the new Europe 2020 strategy even better known.
