

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Implementation of the Lisbon Strategy: Current Situation and Future Prospects'

(2008/C 120/20)

On 27 September 2007 the European Economic and Social Committee decided, under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, to draw up an opinion on

Implementation of the Lisbon Strategy: Current situation and future prospects.

The Committee Bureau instructed the *ad hoc* Group of the Bureau 'Lisbon Group' to prepare the Committee's work on the subject. The rapporteurs were Mr van Iersel and Mr Barabás.

Given the urgent nature of the work, the European Economic and Social Committee appointed Mr van Iersel as rapporteur-general and Mr Barabás as co-rapporteur at its 440th plenary session, held on 12 and 13 December 2007 (meeting of 13 December 2007) and adopted the following opinion by 122 votes to 1 with 12 abstentions.

1. Conclusions and Recommendations

1.1 The EESC considers it desirable that organised civil society in the Member States, in particular national Economic and Social Councils (ESCs), where these exist ⁽¹⁾, are involved in the implementation of the Lisbon Agenda as acting partners. To that end the EESC proposes the following:

1.1.1 Besides governments, societal circles have to foster creative approaches and take effective practical and concrete measures in view of change. Additional partnerships and new alliances are needed to make the Lisbon process a success and endorse its implementation ⁽²⁾. To that end the present opinion deals primarily with the contribution of national ESCs and organised civil society.

1.1.2 Following good practices in several Member States, information, consultation and transparency are needed everywhere for the benefit of the design and the implementation of the National Reform Programmes (NRPs), and the implementation of country specific recommendations.

1.1.3 It is also important for organised civil society to be involved at an early stage in the formulation of the future prospects for the next cycle after 2010 which should be based on growth, jobs, social cohesion and sustainable development.

1.1.4 The EESC emphasises that effective implementation will enhance the desirable visibility and long-term consistency of the Lisbon agenda.

1.1.5 Exchanges of views and practices between the EESC and the national ESCs regarding the NRPs and the Lisbon

agenda could be very useful. The EESC can be supportive in this process.

1.1.6 All national ESCs should be included in the Commission's yearly consultation rounds. Commission representatives could be invited by national ESCs and civil society organisations to discuss ideas and desirable approaches in national context.

1.1.7 Regarding the work in the Council, the EESC is interested in participating in the Lisbon Methodology Working Group, under the auspices of the Council's Economic Policy Committee.

1.1.8 The EESC suggests that the European Council gives the EESC a mandate to publish each year a report containing information, as available, on the involvement of organised civil society, and of national ESCs where they exist, in the progress of the Lisbon Strategy, including concrete suggestions and desirable improvements ⁽³⁾.

1.1.9 The approach of the EESC corresponds with the actions taken by the European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions *vis-à-vis* national parliaments and the regions. The EESC is in favour of further strengthening the cooperation.

2. Introduction

2.1 Since 2005 the Lisbon process has made progress both in content and institutionally. There is growing unanimity among Member States that structural adjustments regarding competitiveness — knowledge based society — sustainable growth and employment are needed.

⁽¹⁾ The institutional framework in this respect is very diverse in the EU: ESCs are present in a significant number of Member States, in most 'new' Member States there are so-called Tripartite Commissions (social partners plus government), in a limited number of Member States there are no ESCs. The EESC is trying to collect as many contributions from representative bodies as possible, to be appended to this opinion in a joint report to the European Council.

⁽²⁾ See Resolution of the EESC on 'The implementation of the renewed Lisbon Strategy' (OJ C 97, 27.4.2007).

⁽³⁾ The EESC notes that it is in no way interfering in Member States, and in particular in Spain, in the existing procedure of consultation, competencies and legitimacy of social partners.

2.2 Institutionally, the methodology of the relaunched Lisbon Strategy has undergone beneficial changes. These include:

- clear agenda for Integrated Guidelines;
- detailed National Reform Programmes (NRPs);
- clarification of the role of the Commission;
- monitoring of national processes by the Commission;
- country specific recommendations;
- peer pressure.

2.3 Practical evidence proves that the combination of a well-defined and agreed European agenda and the revival of a valuable open coordination method which respects subsidiarity is starting to pay off. Among Member States there is an increasing openness to mutual understanding and critical exchanges of views on adjustments. As a result of the new methodology, a growing number of Member States are more willing to look beyond national borders and to examine best practices.

2.4 Nonetheless, there is a gap between rhetoric and reality. The real issue is implementation, which is often incomplete or inaccurate. In many cases concrete goals, measurable objectives and timetables are lacking.

2.5 Moreover, there are substantial differences among Member States. Not all Member States accept critical comments from partner countries or from the Commission easily. There is now, in the context of the Multilateral Surveillance, a certain degree of reciprocal analysis of the NRPs by the Member States.

2.6 In the majority of governments a Mr/Ms Lisbon has been nominated as coordinator. This provision should be beneficial to streamlining cooperation between the Commission and governments, and to transparency. In most cases, though, this minister/state secretary still has to define his/her role inside the government as well as in relation to Parliament and society.

2.7 There is a saying that the Lisbon Strategy is Europe's best kept secret as the expression 'Lisbon Strategy' is rarely used. Since its relaunch in 2005, however, not least by the adjustments in the methodology reforms along agreed lines are gradually taking place in Member States.

2.8 The process is now on track, but the next two years will be critical with regard to its continuation and deepening. Above all, it is crucial that the Lisbon process has a clear and accepted structure, that it is recognised as a Europe-wide strategy, also by non-governmental actors, and that it leads to adjustments and to a convergence of governmental policies.

3. Co-responsibility of the EESC, national ESCs and organised civil society in the Lisbon process

3.1 The Lisbon Agenda is about enabling European society to cope with the challenges of the 21st century and to guarantee its position and role vis-à-vis an increasing number of world actors. It is also about spirit and attitude.

3.2 This process cannot simply be limited to policy makers, legislators and high level groups. It should be a **process for all, with all and by all**, for two reasons:

- input from many circles in society is desirable to define the best possible approaches;
- implementation in Member States depends largely on cooperation between all the stakeholders concerned. Co-ownership is key.

3.3 Co-responsibility and an active engagement of social partners and other civil society organisations would reinforce the process, as it would combine top-down and bottom-up approaches. They would also trigger an indispensable high quality public support.

3.4 Hitherto, in many Member States national ESCs and civil society have had only limited access, if any, to the Lisbon process. Further steps are needed to foster their co-responsibility. In Member States where national ESCs do not exist other institutionalised ways of involvement should be developed.

3.5 Social partners and other civil society organisations have to participate in all stages of the Lisbon process during the calendar year. These stages are: evaluation (of the ongoing cycle), preparation, implementation and follow-up actions of the NRPs and country-specific recommendations in the longer term.

3.6 The EESC considers it desirable that the national ESCs commit themselves to the Lisbon agenda in four ways:

- via satisfactory information and consultation;
- by critically examining national implementation;
- by making concrete proposals;
- by giving more visibility to the Lisbon agenda in giving more profile to the national debate.

3.7 In countries without national ESCs or Tripartite Commissions other ways have to be found to engage social partners in the consultation process. This goes also for organised civil society⁽⁴⁾.

⁽⁴⁾ An example could be Sweden where the Government is consulting the social partners several times a year (in preparation of the NRP) as well as, in separate meetings, organised civil society.

3.8 It must be emphasised that the same method should be followed at regional and local level, which are often decisive for real implementation. Also, at regional level partnerships with the social partners and the civil society organisations concerned must be encouraged in view of territorial and social cohesion.

3.9 Moreover, in order to translate the Lisbon Strategy action plans into reality at regional and local level, they need to be underpinned by efficient management and implementation of the Structural Funds.

3.10 As far as the EESC itself is concerned, its role is four-fold:

- It is to present views of organised civil society.
- It may act as a channel for information which expresses the views of the national ESCs and of other civil society organisations, bringing an added value to the debate in the Commission and the Council.
- The EESC may serve as a forum for the exchange of views and best practices in coordination with national ESCs and it may provide a forum for discussion between them and the Commission ⁽⁵⁾.
- The EESC can add to the dissemination of the objectives and results of Lisbon process.

4. Work on priority themes decided by the 2006 Spring Council

4.1 At its July 2007 plenary session, the EESC adopted, as requested, four own-initiative opinions:

- 'Employment of priority categories' ⁽⁶⁾
- 'Investment in Knowledge and Innovation' ⁽⁷⁾
- 'Business potential, especially of SMEs' ⁽⁸⁾
- 'The definition of an energy policy for Europe' ⁽⁹⁾.

National ESCs participated in the preparation of these own-initiative opinions and their contributions are annexed to the opinions. Subsequently, the EESC has adopted a further opinion on the better integration of climate change strategy into the Lisbon Strategy.

4.2 These own-initiative opinions, also presenting thematic contributions from national ESCs on key issues as identified by the Council, have provided concrete input for the Commission's report, and will serve to launch a wider debate in view of the Lisbon Summit of March 2008.

⁽⁵⁾ In this respect, it is worth noting that the European Parliament has also recently set up a coordination structure together with national parliaments.

⁽⁶⁾ 'Employment of priority categories (Lisbon Strategy)', OJ C 256 of 27.10.2007, p. 93.
(http://www.eesc.europa.eu/lisbon_strategy/eesc_documents/index_en.asp).

⁽⁷⁾ 'Investment in Knowledge and Innovation (Lisbon Strategy)', OJ C 256 of 27.10.2007, p. 17.
(http://www.eesc.europa.eu/lisbon_strategy/eesc_documents/index_en.asp).

⁽⁸⁾ 'Business potential, especially of SMEs (Lisbon Strategy)' OJ C 256 of 27.10.2007, p. 8.
(http://www.eesc.europa.eu/lisbon_strategy/eesc_documents/index_en.asp).

⁽⁹⁾ 'The definition of an energy policy for Europe (Lisbon strategy)', OJ C 256 of 27.10.2007, p. 31.
(http://www.eesc.europa.eu/lisbon_strategy/eesc_documents/index_en.asp).

4.3 The present own-initiative opinion is, in the first place, a contribution to the debate in the Council. Its aim is primarily to specify the role of the social partners and other civil society organisations in the process.

4.4 In the process of preparing its opinion the EESC has also benefited from the contribution of its 'Liaison Group with European Civil Society Organisations and Networks'. That contribution is also appended to the present opinion.

5. Involvement of the social partners and organised civil society

5.1 It is of great importance that the Lisbon Agenda be discussed publicly across society as a desirable European agenda that fits with national circumstances, procedures and legal requirements.

5.2 The Commission's documents should be well focused so as to incite wider debate in society. A search for fruitful new partnerships requires focus and identification, on the one hand, and information and communication, on the other.

5.3 More debate and transparency means more public awareness. It may also foster creativity and openness to unconventional proposals and solutions. In various countries, beneficial measures and practices and/or negotiations between the social partners at sectoral or company level often result in interesting micro-economic developments.

5.4 Most important is the way the social partners and other civil society organisations that have the competences to participate in the process, are involved in the NRPs and in carrying out EU recommendations.

5.5 Involvement of all these actors may also bring about greater convergence between the domestic agendas which is desirable because of increasing economic interdependence in Europe, and the corresponding spill-over effects.

5.6 There is practical evidence that in cases where the social partners and other civil society organisations actively take co-responsibility, the Lisbon process functions better. Lisbon presupposes a non-antagonistic culture of cooperation. There are indications that such cooperation is underway in Member States.

5.7 The degree to which the social partners and other civil society organisations are involved varies between Member States ⁽¹⁰⁾, partly due to the different statutory regulations of the ESCs and similar organisations and partly to the degree of information and consultation, which is still less developed.

⁽¹⁰⁾ See footnote 3.

5.8 The Commission should encourage all the Member States to include civil society organisations and, in those countries where they exist, national ESCs, in national consultations.

5.9 During the consultation rounds with some Member States, the Commission also meets with social partners. This practice should gradually be extended. It could allow the Commission to play a more intensive monitoring role. Moreover, in those countries where the government is part of the ESC or Tripartite commission, it would be advisable for the Commission to meet social partners separately.

5.10 It would be helpful for national ESCs to exchange their experiences regarding consultation and involvement ⁽¹⁾. These could include:

- information and consultation on the Lisbon Agenda in the national context;
- the way ESCs present their opinion to the government;
- the extent to which these opinions are reflected in government policies.

5.11 In order to promote convergent practices among national ESCs, bilateral or trilateral meetings (forums, roundtables) might also be useful.

5.12 The EESC could contribute by collecting examples of good practice in relation to information and consultation across Europe and by drawing up a list of interesting practices and measures promoted by social partners and other civil society organisations in the Member States.

5.13 As regards contributions from Member States without an ESC, the EESC may cooperate directly with national civil society organisations through its Members that employ fact-finding missions in various forms, for example by holding hearings at national level.

6. Sharing best practices

6.1 There is certainly an added value in presenting concrete microeconomic examples of instances where national objectives have either been, or are expected to be, attained with the participation of social partners and organised civil society in the Member States.

6.2 Examples include:

Research, Innovation, Knowledge

- Promotion of the knowledge-based society

⁽¹⁾ An illustrative example of monitoring of national NRPs is the Greek ESC that has set up an observatory for the Lisbon Strategy. This creates a visible tool to follow its progress or lack of progress. Other ESCs are interested in following this example.

- Education at all levels, including professional training — New skills for new opportunities

- New start for lifelong learning pacts and open learning centres

- Cooperation between universities/research institutes and SMEs

- Implementation of the European Technological Institute

- Innovation platforms with the participation of the private sector.

Entrepreneurship and Competitiveness

- Promotion of start-ups and entrepreneurship

- Special attention for SMEs: legal conditions; risk capital

- One-stop shops for businesses

- Reduction of administrative burdens and, in particular, an identification of areas where such a reduction would be most effective

- E-government

- Innovation subsidies for SMEs ('innovation vouchers')

- Specific tax measures.

Labour market and Employment

- Innovative ideas and measurable objectives to create employment for young and elderly people

- Social inclusion for vulnerable groups

- Gender equality

- Fostering the creation of sustainable jobs

- Desirable approaches regarding part-time work

- New ideas and ways of implementation regarding 'flexicurity'

- New partnerships at local and regional level

- Social Economy enterprises.

Furthermore, effective and concrete measures, including timetables, related to energy and climate change need to be discussed.

In all these cases, discussions among stakeholders in one or more Member States are underway. National ESCs and organised civil society have their own views on practical applications. The discussions among government officials and politicians would certainly be enriched by well-channelled bottom-up proposals, which would illustrate the manifold potentialities in European society.

6.3 Wider discussion involving stakeholders would help to set new concrete objectives for the Open Method of Coordination. This may include a system of benchmarking, indicators and peer reviews to measure the degree of engagement of organised civil society.

6.4 It would also be interesting for the Commission and the Council to know what issues national ESCs are discussing among themselves. The EESC might list those of horizontal

European significance. The more these discussions concern concrete approaches and measures promoting Lisbon objectives, the more attention they will attract in government circles.

6.5 Implementation and the way it is secured by goals, measurable objectives and timetables is key. Organised civil society as a whole and especially national ESCs can play an effective role in identifying deficiencies and helping to find sustainable solutions.

Brussels, 13 December 2007.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Dimitris DIMITRIADIS

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Proposal for a Council Directive on the structure and rates of excise duty applied to manufactured tobacco (Codified version)'

COM(2007) 587 final

(2008/C 120/21)

On 24 October 2007 the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

Proposal for a Council Directive on the structure and rates of excise duty applied to manufactured tobacco (Codified version).

Since the Committee unreservedly endorses the content of the proposal and feels that it requires no comment on its part, it decided, at its 440th plenary session of 12 and 13 December 2007 (meeting of 12 December 2007), by 129 votes in favour with six abstentions, to issue an opinion endorsing the proposed text.

Brussels, 12 December 2007.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Dimitris DIMITRIADIS
