

Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the 'Follow-up of the World Summit of Social Development'

(2000/C 168/10)

In accordance with Rule of Procedure 23(3), the European Economic and Social Committee decided at its Plenary Session on 29 April 1999 to adopt an opinion on the above-mentioned subject.

The Section for External Relations, which was responsible for preparing the work, adopted its opinion on 14 April 2000. The rapporteur was Mr Etty.

At its 372nd plenary session on 27 April 2000, the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 107 votes in favour, one vote against and six abstentions.

1. Introduction

1.1. From 26-30 June 2000, the General Assembly of the United Nations will, in a Special Session in Geneva, assess the implementation of the outcome of the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen (1995) and discuss further activities.

1.2. The 'Social Summit' of 1995 in Copenhagen discussed three main issues:

- the eradication of poverty
- the promotion of social integration, and
- the promotion of full employment.

1.3. The result of the Summit was a Declaration on Social Development and a Progress of Action to implement it. The core of this were ten commitments made by the Member States, a large majority of whom represented by their Heads of State and/or Government. These commitments were:

Commitment 1: We commit ourselves to creating an economic, political, social, cultural and legal environment that will enable people to achieve social development.

Commitment 2: We commit ourselves to the goal of eradicating poverty in the world, through decisive national actions and international co-operation, as an ethical, social, political and economic imperative of humankind.

Commitment 3: We commit ourselves to promoting the goal of full employment as a basic priority of our economic and social policies, and to enabling all men and women to attain secure and sustainable livelihoods through freely chosen productive employment and work.

Commitment 4: We commit ourselves to promoting social integration by fostering societies that are stable, safe and just and that are based on the promotion and protection of all

human rights, as well as on non-discrimination, tolerance, respect for diversity, equality of opportunity, solidarity, security, and participation of all people, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and persons.

Commitment 5: We commit ourselves to promoting full respect for human dignity and to achieving equality and equity between women and men, and to recognising and enhancing the participation and leadership roles of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life and in development.

Commitment 6: We commit ourselves to promoting and attaining the goals of universal and equitable access to quality education, the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, and the access of all to primary health care, making particular efforts to rectify inequalities relating to social conditions and without distinction as to race, national origin, gender, age or disability; respecting and promoting our common and particular cultures; striving to strengthen the role of culture in development; preserving the essential bases of people-centred sustainable development; and contributing to the full development of human resources and to social development. The purpose of these activities is to eradicate poverty, promote full and productive employment and foster social integration.

Commitment 7: We commit ourselves to accelerating the economic, social and human resource development of Africa and the least developed countries.

Commitment 8: We commit ourselves to ensuring that when structural adjustment programmes are agreed to they include social development goals, in particular eradicating poverty, promoting full and productive employment, and enhancing social integration.

Commitment 9: We commit ourselves to increasing significantly and/or utilising more efficiently the resources allocated to social development in order to achieve the goals of the Summit through national action and regional and international co-operation.

Commitment 10: We commit ourselves to an improved and strengthened framework for international, regional and subregional co-operation for social development, in a spirit of partnership, through the United Nations and other multilateral institutions.

1.4. Preparations for the Special Session on the follow-up of the Copenhagen Declaration and Program of Action started in September 1997 with the establishment of a Preparatory Committee.

Member States of the UN have, in the course of 1999, sent in reports on the effect they have given to the commitments. These reports have been discussed and assessed in a meeting of the Commission on Social Development of the Economic and Social Council of the UN in February of this year.

1.5. As regards regional preparations, for reasons not totally clear, Europe has been omitted by the UN. The logical UN body to do this is the ECE (which is for instance in charge of the regional preparation of the follow-up of the 1995 Beijing Women's Summit). The Council of Europe has stepped in and organised a preparatory 'European Conference on Social Development' in Dublin on January 18-19 next, which discussed reports of the Member States of the Council and did more in-depth work on the commitments 1, 2 and 4 in working parties.

2. The EU and the Social Summit

2.1. Implementation of the ten Copenhagen commitments is, of course, primarily a matter for the individual EU Member States. It is important to stress that in the context of this Opinion. However, the EU has taken a strong interest on the Copenhagen Summit in 1994 and 1995. The European Community produced a Communication on the Summit and had extensive consultations with civil society (including the Economic and Social Committee and the economic and social interest groups represented on it). A large EC delegation participated in the 'Social Summit', of which the Committee was part.

2.2. The European Community has not submitted a report on implementation to the UN-Secretariat. The Commission's Communication on the European Community's follow-up to the World Summit on Social Development of 1996 is, obviously, not a suitable basis for an assessment at this point of time. The Committee realises that the Commission was not obliged to report. However, taking into account Commitment 10, it thinks that the Commission has missed a chance to show the international community how cooperation between

the Member States has produced an added value to the respective national policies regarding poverty, social integration and employment. This is in particular so as regards the latter.

2.3. The EU Presidency has, in the past few years, expressed itself on a number of occasions on the implementation of the outcome of the 'Social Summit', lastly during the 54th Session of the General Assembly of the UN.

3. General remarks

3.1. In its February 1995 Opinion on the Copenhagen Summit, the Committee has made a number of observations and recommendations which still seem to be relevant. They include:

- an initiative to be taken by the EU to take the lead in a campaign for wider ratification and full application of ILO Convention No 144 on Tripartite Consultation (now, in 2000, the EU could focus on its candidate Member States, its partners in the Barcelona process in the Mercosur and the ACP countries for this campaign);
- measures to promote social development through international trade (the Committee has given an elaboration of these early proposals in its 1999 Opinion on the WTO and in recent Opinions on EU trade policy);
- measures to combat child labour (in 1999, the ILO has adopted a new Convention on the worst forms of child labour. The EU could make an important gesture to the international community if all 15 Member States would quickly ratify this new Convention. Also, the two Member States which have not yet ratified ILO Convention No 138 on Minimum Age (Austria and the UK) should make an effort to do so in the very near future. Furthermore, at this point of time, the Committee wishes to encourage the EU and all its Member States to support financially the ILO programs to help eradicate child labour);
- encouraging Member States to use their influence in the IMF, the World Bank, the OECD and regional development banks to convince these institutions of the urgent need to work more closely together with the ILO (at this point of time, we would add the WTO to this list, and also urge the EU to make a joint effort to help democratise these organisations and increase their transparency);
- strengthening the coherence of the EU's external, security, trade, agriculture and development policies (here, the Committee would add, five years after Copenhagen, that this increased coherence must be used in particular in the fight against poverty in the world, and for the prevention of armed conflicts);

— making a clearly focused contribution to the follow-up process by selecting for coordinated EU-wide actions: a limited number of initiatives in the field of employment creation, the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

3.2. Although implementation, as earlier stated, is the prime responsibility of Member States, concerted EU action can have considerable added value. The Committee expressed that belief already in 1995 in the final recommendation of its Opinion (para. 13.2). In the 1995 Opinion, when addressing regional co-operation, the Committee concentrated on co-operation in the EU. The enlargement process, the development of Euromediterranean co-operation, and the growth of the relationship with the ACP countries strongly suggest that one should assess, in a realistic way, further geographical areas where an EU input could make a significant difference for the chances of success of the 'Copenhagen process'.

3.3. If one looks at the relevant areas of social policy where the EU has made significant progress which might also be relevant to other groups of countries, taking into account the limited resources available and the agenda of the UN where the fight against poverty will figure prominently this year, then employment policy and the way it has been developed springs to mind. That does not mean, of course, that the EU and its Member States should not make an effort to increase their development cooperation efforts and to alleviate the debt burden of the poorest development countries. It means that it is in particular in the field of employment policy that the EU can, through regional cooperation, make a particularly valuable contribution to the efforts of certain partners.

3.4. The ILO, which has been given the first responsibility for the promotion of full employment (Commitment 3) in the Copenhagen process by the UN, has done important work in the past five years. It has reached the conclusion that, while in a few industrialised and newly industrialising countries progress with regard to job creation and reduction of unemployment and underemployment has been registered, the employment situation and progress in alleviating poverty in many parts of the world, particularly among developing countries and countries in transition, remained unsatisfactory and in some countries had even worsened⁽¹⁾. The ILO has called for renewed efforts in job creation, improvement of the quality of jobs, training and gender equality in the workplace. It maintains that an important element in this is the ratification and implementation of the ILO core conventions and the follow-up of the 1998 ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. It has called for a new employment strategy with global and national dimensions.

For the success of this, co-ordinated actions of the ILO and other UN agencies, and in particular with the Bretton Woods institutions, OECD and regional organisations is vital, according to the ILO. In this context, the Committee also notes that recent events have demonstrated an urgent need for reform of UN institutions, in particular with respect to their democratic character and the transparency of their policy-making and implementation. Criticism on and resistance against, in particular, IMF, World Bank and WTO have clearly been motivated by the view that these institutions do not pay enough attention to the negative impact of the globalisation of the world economy.

4. Specific remarks

4.1. In 1995 already, the Committee wanted the ILO to play a prominent role in the implementation of the result of the Social Summit. It thinks that, indeed, the active promotion of the 1998 ILO Declaration can be most conducive for an effective worldwide employment promotion strategy. It strongly recommends that the EU commits itself to this, politically as well as financially. EU involvement must also include an effort to secure ratification by all the Member States of the fundamental human rights Conventions of the ILO. In addition to the gaps in EU Member States' ratification of the Minimum Age Convention (No 138), mentioned in para 3.1, the Committee once more recalls the fact that the ILO's Convention against Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) (No 111) has still not been ratified by Luxembourg.

4.2. The Committee is concerned that, more and more, economic policy tends to escape from political control. Therefore, the EU and its Member States must press for clear social policy guidelines for IMF and World Bank policies, based on the Copenhagen commitments, including the importance the latter attach to ILO core labour standards. They must also continue their efforts to establish a standing working forum on fundamental labour standards in multilateral trade agreements between the ILO and the WTO. The Committee welcomes — in particular with a view to the developments at the WTO Ministerial Conference in Seattle — all steps which could lead to greater understanding (and, by consequence, also to concrete measures) promoting fundamental labour standards.

Multinational companies, in their activities in developing and in transition countries, must respect the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Companies and the ILO's Tripartite Declaration on Multinational Companies and Social Policy. The Committee hopes that the review of the OECD Guidelines, currently underway will result in the inclusion of references to all the ILO 'core labour standards' (i.e. freedom of association, collective bargaining, forced labour, discrimination in labour and occupation and child labour).

⁽¹⁾ See 1999 UN's 'Human Development Report' and 'Poverty Report'.

4.3. As regards the Candidate Member States in Central and Eastern Europe, the Committee recommends EU-support for the development of an employment strategy along the lines of the 'Luxembourg process' by them. This will at the same time help the Governments of these countries to find sustainable solutions for the employment problems in their countries, and help to introduce a major element of the European Social model in the region.

4.4. In its relationship with the neighbouring countries in the Mediterranean area, the EU should encourage partner Governments to involve employers' organisations, trade unions and other relevant socio-economic interest groups stronger than before in their employment policies, wherever possible in a regional context. Further development of elements in the social dimension of the Barcelona co-operation (vocational training, social dialogue) should be included.

4.5. The Committee thinks that in the ACP countries, and in particular those in Sub-Sahara Africa (see Commitment 7), the EU should continue the efforts it has made in the past few years to help create Economic and Social Councils, which potentially are important instruments for socio-economic interest groups to influence and help to implement employment policies of their Governments.

4.6. In developing the initiatives referred to in para 3.1, last indent, above, the Committee wants the Commission to target in particular the poorest and socially most excluded groups within the EU.

4.7. The Secretary General of the UN has called for coherence in the follow-up of the various 'People's Summits'

of the 1990s. Taking that into account, and also referring to the Opinion on the follow-up of the 'Beijing Women's Summit', it is submitting simultaneously with the present one, the Committee recalls that 'feminisation of poverty' has been a major point of concern at the 1995 Beijing Conference. The Committee refers to paras 3.3 and 3.4 above and wishes to underscore in this context the importance of the gender component in the areas for action, identified by the ILO. The same holds for the proposals for EU-support for the candidate Member States in Central and Eastern Europe, in the Mediterranean, and in Sub-Sahara Africa in paras 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5.

4.8. The social and economic interest groups represented on the Committee have a special role to play in social development. It is surprising that the UN have given NGOs a special role in the preparation of the follow-up of the 'Social Summit' of 1995, but apparently does not think it important to give a special place to employers federations, trade unions, consumers, farmers organisations, welfare organisations, etc. In particular, the role of employers organisations and trade unions has been a controversial issue between a large number of developing countries and industrialised countries. The Committee is deeply concerned about this. The European Commission must address this point and clarify in the Geneva Special Session of the General Assembly that these organisations, with their strongly representative character, are very particular NGOs if it comes to social development and that they not only express the views of their members but often participate in national policy-making and implementation. The European Commission must also stimulate that socio-economic interest groups be represented on national delegations of Member States to the Special Session in Geneva. Also, the Committee urges the Commission to invite it, like in 1995, to be represented in its delegation.

Brussels, 27 April 2000.

The President
of the Economic and Social Committee
Beatrice RANGONI MACHIAVELLI

APPENDIX I

to the Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee**Preliminary assessment of implementation**

The UN Secretariat has received reports from a large majority of the Member States (among whom all 15 Member States of the EU), the Regional Commissions of the UN (with the exception of the ECE), the UN funds and programs, the specialised agencies including the Bretton Woods institutions, other intergovernmental institutions such as the regional development banks, and the OECD.

Although reports contain positive elements, it is clear that in many respects only limited progress has been made with regard to the three main themes of 'Copenhagen'. According to the UN Secretariat, several targets specified in the Program of Action will not be met within the period agreed, and in some cases there have been serious setbacks. The severe economic difficulties several countries experienced in the past few years as a result of the financial crisis and related developments have been a major cause. There is also a concern that the recent emphasis on financial and economic policies has often not been development oriented, and that the dominance of a limited set of macroeconomic targets and parameters over the social, political, cultural and environmental aspects has been detrimental.

Progress areas include, according to the UN Secretariat:

- Greater awareness of and commitment to social development as an overriding goal of government policy and a basis for mobilisation of civil society,
- Progress towards poverty eradication, albeit uneven, slow and erratic,
- Renewed hope that full employment is an achievable goal, although progress has been timid and threatened by often hidden underemployment, widening informalisation and lack of social protection,
- Continued progress in literacy, declining infant mortality and life expectancy, school enrolment and access to basic social services, despite local and at times severe setbacks; and
- Equality and equity between men and women has moved closer to reality in major regions of the world, despite the persistent tendency for women to be the first losers in times of crisis and restructuring,
- A majority of governments have put their money where their mouth is and increased allocation of domestic resources for social development in relative, and often in absolute, terms.

'Regression areas', as identified by the same sources, include:

- Local and region conflicts have caused setbacks in social integration in a growing number of regions of the world,
- The world overall has become a more unequal place, with increasing inequalities in income, in employment, in access to social services and to opportunities for participation in public and civil society institutions,
- Contrary to the commitment made at Copenhagen to strengthen co-operation for social development through the UN, resources allocated for social development in the framework of international co-operation have declined, although there is a renewed commitment of the international community for debt reduction for the poorest countries,
- The burden of debt has grown markedly since Copenhagen, further squeezing resources available for social development,
- With liberalisation of capital flows, the world has become more vulnerable to sudden financial shocks with severe social consequences where the real victims of such shocks are increasingly powerless to rectify their social situation.

The Secretariat had in November 1999 identified the following eleven cross-cutting issues in the reports received, which they wanted to analyse further for an evaluation of progress/regression and for extracting ideas for further initiatives:

1. Inequality: In the face of growing inequality within and between nations, how can the fruits of development be more equitably distributed within and amongst nations? Is inequality the price to pay for economic growth, or is inequality an impediment to growth?
 2. Financing of social services: Increasingly social services are being targeted towards the most vulnerable groups of society. However, targeting and means-testing of benefits can lead in some cases to a break-up in social solidarity which in turn provokes a decline in quality of and resources for those services. How can solidarity and sustainability be reconciled with the need for greater efficiency and selectivity in providing social services?
 3. Urbanisation: While the majority of the poor still live in rural areas, the world and especially developing countries, is rapidly being transformed into an urban planet. In the face of this transformation, how can scarce resources best be allocated between rural and urban areas? How can social development best take into account the specific needs of each sector of society?
 4. The working poor: Although in many areas of the world unemployment has decreased all too often the new jobs are of low quality, associated with low wages and little social protection. Increasingly, employment is not sufficient to bring populations out of poverty. How have countries addressed the growing phenomena of the 'working poor' and what can be done to improve wages at the low end of the labour market?
 5. Informalisation of employment: In many developing countries, formal sector employment represents a small and declining share of the labour market. Furthermore the informal sector is no longer a monopoly of developing countries, and all over the world, the informal sector is growing in a symbiotic relationship with the formal sector. What can be done to improve revenues and social protection in the informal sector, and this without undercutting the ability of the formal sector to create jobs?
 6. Rehabilitating the public sector: The process of economic reforms has in many cases weakened the capacity of the state to promote social development. One of the lessons learned from recent financial crises, is that liberalisation and privatisation should not take place at the expense of an appropriate regulatory framework. A strong, transparent public sector is required to oversee the process of economic reform, and to create an enabling environment for social development.
 7. Decentralisation: There has been a clear trend towards decentralisation and devolution of responsibilities to local government. Decentralisation is often conducive to greater participation and accountability, but not necessarily conducive to equitable distribution of resources across regions and populations groups. How can these conflicting concerns best be reconciled?
 8. Declining ODA: Whereas certain countries have increased allocations of ODA, this has taken place in the face of an overall trend of decline, this despite the pledges made at Copenhagen. What strategies can be adopted to reverse this trend?
 9. Crisis intervention: Furthermore, scarce development resources are being allocated to an increasing number of crisis interventions which are much more costly, in both human and in financial terms, than crisis prevention and longer-term promotion of human development. Increasing wars, local conflicts and natural disasters have had a negative impact on social development.
 10. Need for effective strategies to implement the commitments of the Social Summit. The gap between commitment and implementation remains a major problem. Still more work is required to develop the strategies, tools and capacity required to successfully implement the Copenhagen commitments.
 11. Debt servicing has become a cumulative burden which is weighing heavily on social development. How can debt relief be most effectively implemented for a positive impact on increasing social expenditure?
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APPENDIX II

to the Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee**Specific comments of the ESC 1995 Opinion on World Summit for Social Development (CES 4/95) —
OJ C 110, 2.5.1995)****1. Principles**

1.1. The principles laid down in the Commission's Communication, which it wishes to see reflected in the results of the World Summit for Social Development, are endorsed. The Committee is particularly pleased with the first principle: that respect for human rights and democracy — including dialogue between employers and workers and the participation of civil society — cannot be divorced from social development. It is convinced that these are truly universal fundamental human rights. The Committee hopes that the World Summit will adopt this principle in the explicit terms used by the Commission, and invites those Member States which have not yet done so, to include it in their legislation and in their national and international practices in order to promote real, worldwide social development.

1.2. An important practical instrument for stimulating dialogue between employers and workers and promoting participation of civil society in social development throughout the world is Convention No 144 of 1976 of the ILO on Tripartite Consultation to promote the Implementation of International Labour Standards. It is a pity that this instrument is not mentioned by the Commission. Application of Convention No 144 promotes both democracy and social peace. The Committee thinks that the European Union should, on the basis of its own first principle, take the lead in a campaign for wider ratification and full application of this Convention by ILO Member States. That campaign should start with consultations with a view to ratification of this convention by all Member States of the EU.

2. Objectives

2.1. The Committee highlights and supports activities of the European Union aimed at multilateral action which will promote social development through international trade. It agrees that negotiations on this matter must be continued within the World Trade Organization (WTO) and welcomes the EU's general approach in this matter. The EU must make a real effort to make this a priority issue in the WTO. The Committee considers that priority should be given to encouraging countries to ratify the basic ILO human rights Conventions on Freedom of Association and protection of the right to organise (1948) (for workers and employers), on the right to organise Collective Bargaining (1949) and on Forced Labour (1930) and the abolition of Forced Labour (1957). All EU Member States have ratified the Conventions on Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining, and the other human rights Conventions, which have also been ratified by an overwhelming majority of ILO Member States, including a large number of developing countries.

2.2. The Committee regrets that the ILO Convention against Discrimination in Employment and Occupation (1958), which is of exactly the same nature and fundamental importance as the Conventions mentioned earlier and just as widely ratified, is not mentioned by the Commission in this context. This must be an unintended omission. During the meeting of the Third Preparatory Committee of the Social Summit last month in New York, the EU has shown the importance it gives to the principles enshrined in this convention. The Committee therefore strongly recommends that the European Union correct this and include this Anti-Discrimination Convention in the proposed campaign. Logically, this should also be a vehicle for some of the European Union's views and intentions concerning the eradication of poverty and exclusion, laid down for instance in the second Conclusion of the Commission's document (equality between men and women).

2.3. The Committee attaches great importance to raising the status of women through access to income and to education. Education, especially of women and girls, is a key factor in the battle against poverty and overpopulation. Where women are educated, both infant death rates and birth rates fall.

2.4. The substance of the Conventions referred to in points 11.1. and 11.2. underpins the approach to the 'social clause' — already proposed in various ESC Opinions — an approach which obviously has nothing in common with protectionism. On the contrary, widespread application of these principles would boost trade by ensuring that all workers enjoy equal basic rights and consumers have reasonable guarantees that the goods they purchase have not been produced under inhumane working conditions. In this connection, the Committee also draws the attention to the ongoing analytical work of the OECD on this issue, the results of which might provide valuable arguments for further negotiations.

2.5. One effective way to encourage governments to comply and ratify with important ILO Conventions is to give priority when granting aid and trade preferences to countries which implement genuine, effective social development strategies. This could be a worthwhile contribution by the European Union to the increase in the resources assigned to social development which will be necessary, even if the Summit succeeds in using existing resources more efficiently. In this context, the Committee welcomes Council Regulation (EC) No 3281/94 of 19 December last year applying a four year scheme of Generalised Tariff Preferences (1995-1998) in respect of certain industrial products originating in developing countries.

2.6. The Commission's proposals can help to create more humane living and working conditions for child workers. Child labour can gradually be stamped out by the introduction of general measures to improve 'well-being' (working conditions, opportunities for education, etc.).

2.7. Ratification and compliance with ILO Conventions are as much a function of good governance as is the effective development of social policies. The trade and aid policies proposed in the previous paragraph will ensure that existing resources are used more effectively. The developed and developing countries should in parallel introduce measures to reduce corrupt practices in North/South business dealings. These practices are a grave impediment to social and economic progress.

2.8. If the European Union really wishes to include social development in the policies developed by IMF, World Bank and regional development banks, it must actively use its influence in these institutions to convince them that they must cooperate with the ILO much more intensively than in the past, in particular on structural adjustment operations. The EU must take proper account of the impact of structural adjustment programmes on the poor, for example, in health, education and agricultural policy changes.

2.9. The Committee reiterates its view, expressed in earlier Opinions, that it is high time to construct the conditions and the instruments which can stimulate economic growth, trade and distribution of wealth and opportunities at the global level and link this to a process of development which is compatible with social progress and protection of the environment. This requires that the EU commits itself to strengthen coherence between its external, security, trade, agriculture and development policies. The Committee urges the EU to make this commitment at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, given the coincidence in time of this Summit meeting and the establishment of the WTO.

3. Means: resources and follow-up

The Committee wishes to stress the importance of the Commission's intention to help developing countries (and in particular the poorest among them) by measures which stimulate gradual integration of the informal sector into the formal economy. In this connection the Committee stresses the important role NGOs, including farmers' organizations, cooperatives and women's organizations can play in addition to employers' and trade union organizations.

4. Conclusions

4.1. The Committee is pleased with the determination of the European Union, expressed in its Conclusions, to step up its contribution to multilateral negotiations on standards and Conventions. This must be done with a clear division of roles and responsibilities. The Committee refers, in this context, to its Own-initiative Opinion on the Relations between the EU and the International Labour Organization (ILO), adopted last month.

4.2. Finally, the Committee strongly recommends that the European Union, involving workers, employers and other relevant socio-economic interest groups, make a clearly focused contribution to the follow-up process of the Social Summit by selecting for coordinated, EU-wide action, a limited number of initiatives in the fields of employment creation, the fight against poverty, and social integration. Implementation of the Summit decisions will be a matter for individual governments. However, the Summit should, and probably will, stress the significance of regional cooperation in the implementation process. It is important for the success of the Social Summit that a major group of countries, such as those united in the European Union, set an example of such cooperation in their own region. The Commission is invited to work out a proposal on the basis of existing European Union policies on employment, poverty, and social exclusion.

Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the 'Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women'

(2000/C 168/11)

On 27 January 2000, the Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 23(3) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an opinion on the above-mentioned subject.

The Section for External Relations, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 14 April 2000. The rapporteur was Ms Florio.

At its 372nd plenary session (meeting of 27 April 2000) the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion with 116 votes in favour and two abstentions.

1. Introduction

1.1. The UN Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing on 4-15 September 1995, adopted a Declaration and Platform for Action, defining objectives and strategies for the development, advancement and equal participation of women.

1.2. Five years after the Fourth Conference, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolutions 52/100 and 52/231, convening a special session on 'Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the 21st century', to be held in New York on 5-9 June 2000.

1.3. The purpose of the special session is to assess the progress made in implementing the Platform for Action adopted in Beijing, identify the main obstacles and recommend future action to combat gender-based discrimination.

1.4. In order to assess the extent to which the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action have been implemented, the session will of necessity have to take into account the reports on the World Conference on Human Rights, held in

Vienna in 1993, which were approved at the International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo in 1994, and at the World Summit on Social Development, held in Copenhagen in 1995.

1.5. The Vienna Conference on Human Rights of 14-25 June 1993 reaffirmed clearly that the human rights of women throughout the life cycle are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights.

1.6. The Cairo Conference of 5-13 September 1994 confirmed the key role women play in development and population growth issues. For the first time, the conference highlighted the need to improve the social and economic status of women, and launch education and training programmes to raise their awareness of their rights. Better access to education, information and healthcare is the sine qua non for an improved demographic policy.

1.7. The Copenhagen World Summit (6-12 March 1995) highlighted, for the first time, the 'feminisation' of poverty, and asserted the principle that sustainable development can only be launched by means of economic policies which take social factors and, especially gender differences, fully into account.