

II

(Preparatory Acts)

COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the 'Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions "Scoreboard on Implementing the Social Policy Agenda"'

(2003/C 66/01)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: 'Scoreboard on Implementing the Social Policy Agenda', COM(2002) 89 final;

having regard to the decision taken by the European Commission on 19 February 2002 to consult the Committee under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

having regard to its Bureau's decision of 6 February 2002 to instruct the Commission for 'Economic and Social Policy' to prepare the Committee's work on this subject;

having regard to the Communication from the Commission: 'Social Policy Agenda', COM(2000) 379 final;

having regard to the Communication from the Commission: 'Scoreboard on Implementing the Social Policy Agenda', COM(2001) 104 final;

having regard to the Committee of the Regions opinion on the Social Policy Agenda, (CdR 300/2000 fin) ⁽¹⁾;

having regard to the draft opinion CdR 167/2002 rev. of the Commission for Economic and Social Policy, adopted on 11 June 2002 (rapporteur: Mr Gustav — S — EPP, Member of Solna municipal council),

adopted the following opinion unanimously at its 46th plenary session on 10 October 2002.

1. The Committee of the Regions' views on the Communication

1.1. The Committee of the Regions regards it as very positive that the process instigated in Lisbon is continuing. It is pleased to note that the link between economic policy, employment policy and social policy is highlighted and that a European policy of solidarity is being established. The annual scoreboard on implementing the social policy agenda is one of the instruments for monitoring the development of this process.

1.2. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the change to the structure and content of the scoreboard made by the inclusion of a list of planned initiatives. This gives a better overview of the progress of work. The CoR is also very pleased that a considerable part of the scoreboard is devoted to the follow-up to social questions.

1.3. The CoR regrets that the scoreboard has reached the Committee so late: the Committee feels that the scoreboard should be sent in good time to allow an opinion to be issued before the spring meeting of the European Council.

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 144, 16.5.2001, p. 55.

1.4. The CoR welcomes the planned assessment of the social policy agenda. It is important to study how far the work on the social policy agenda has progressed and to review possible changes in the future. This is one aspect of that agenda's flexibility.

1.5. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the fact that the key role of the regional and local authorities is emphasised in the work on the social policy agenda. To bring Europe closer to its citizens and to make it more democratic and open, there is a need for continuing active cooperation on the part of regional and local authorities, and it is desirable for their role to be further strengthened, at local, regional, national and Community levels, particularly in the open method of coordination. In this way the EU would give practical application to the subsidiarity and proportionality principles. This also guarantees a varied approach to implementation, thereby supporting the public in their dealings with local and regional democracy. Exchange of experience and good practice at local and regional level ought to be encouraged.

1.6. The Committee of the Regions welcomes the evaluation of the open method of coordination for which the Commission planned in its 'annual policy strategy for 2003' (1). The Commission calls for consultation with other institutions on this evaluation and on future proposals for implementation of the open method of coordination. The open method is essentially one of voluntary cooperation, and it is important for it to remain so.

1.7. The Committee of the Regions considers the social dialogue to be a key instrument, and welcomes the planned review. The social dialogue has involved closer cooperation between the social partners and a common platform for exchanging experiences. It has developed into an important part of EU development in the social sphere. However, it has come to be a many-faceted concept encompassing a number of dissimilar components; this is why the CoR welcomes a review.

1.8. The CoR emphasises the importance of gradually framing qualitative and quantitative indicators for follow-up and evaluation. Only indicators which are easy for Member States to interpret should be used. The indicators should be based as far as possible on already accessible data to avoid burdening local and regional authorities with further data collection.

2. The Committee of the Regions' recommendations on the Communication

General recommendations

2.1. The Committee feels that the scoreboard should give a clearer presentation of progress made in relation to the Lisbon strategy's objectives. Such a presentation would facilitate follow-up and focus attention on the practical results, besides making it easier for the individual citizen to study the result of the work on the social policy agenda.

2.2. The Committee welcomes the wide-ranging thrust of the social policy agenda, but the priorities must be clarified to ensure that the agenda can lead to practical results. There are still too many of them and they are expressed in too general terms. This also impedes follow-up as well as the possibility of interpreting the results.

The Committee of the Regions therefore proposes that the priorities in the agenda be clarified in the review of the agenda in 2003.

2.3. The CoR takes the view that the social policy agenda and the European welfare model are extremely important factors within the EU. To ensure that the development of the agenda and the European welfare model is successful, it is necessary for local and regional authorities to have the chance to find the solutions which work best for the citizen. The citizens' values and traditions must be taken into account before the system will be accepted.

There are substantial advantages to an approach based on the proximity principle and on decentralised rather than centralised responsibility. One argument for centralised responsibility is that of equality, but equality is not the same thing as uniformity. Centralised responsibility must build on generalisations which make the response to local needs less precise and work against commitment and the taking of responsibility on the part of the individual. Local responsibility strengthens the influence over the individual's own 'welfare' and increases the chances of mobilising commitment and resources.

The Committee of the Regions considers that better conditions should be created for local and regional solutions. Local and regional authorities shoulder the practical responsibility for policy in liaison with the general public. The Committee of the Regions proposes that this be dealt with in the review of the social policy agenda.

2.4. The Committee of the Regions takes the view that the evaluation of the open method of coordination should undertake a critical assessment of the overall application of this method in the social policy agenda. The evaluation should also pay special attention to local and regional experience of the method's application, especially with regard to the implementation of national action plans. The Committee of the Regions can contribute material on this experience.

(1) Annual policy strategy for 2003, SEC(2002) 217, p. 7.

In many of the Member States the open method of coordination touches on essential local and regional questions in terms of responsibility and powers. The subsidiarity principle should therefore determine how the method is implemented. There is a very urgent need for local and regional authorities to be involved nationally in an effective procedure for framing national positions and action plans and for drawing up indicators.

The Committee of the Regions advocates the introduction of a working method based on local and regional cooperation in a constructive consultation process at national government and EU level. This is in line with the Commission's discussion in the White Paper on forms of government in the EU (1). In addition, it encourages lively dialogue on social issues among democratic representatives at all levels.

2.5. The CoR has pointed to the need to develop and boost consultation at Community level with national authorities which represent local and regional authorities/bodies. There are more than 80 000 municipalities, county councils and regions in the EU, which together employ more than 9,4 million full-time staff. They need to participate, through their European organisation, the CEMR, in the European consultation procedure on labour market questions. It is a problem that these employers, with their democratic roots in the local community, are not treated by the Commission as a fully-fledged partner in the social dialogue. The representativeness study (2) of public employers which Louvain University has carried out at the request of the Commission is a major contribution to increasing understanding of this important group of employers in the field of public enterprise.

More and better jobs

2.6. The Committee of the Regions agrees with the account given of the employment strategy. However, the Committee wishes to emphasise that it is important to strengthen the local and regional dimension and to bear in mind the 'bottom-up' approach to the employment strategy. There is a general feeling among municipal and regional bodies that the Member States have retained too tight a control on regional and local development questions. Thus it is not enough to recognise the importance of the local and regional levels; they must also be given the authority and tools to participate. Efforts to create jobs must be differentiated according to regional variations.

2.7. All the employment strategy guidelines, possibly excluding Guideline 12, concern matters for which local and regional bodies in the majority of the Member States have a responsibility by virtue of their different roles. The Committee therefore proposes that the employment guidelines for 2003 should include the role of local and regional bodies among the points for mainstreaming in the implementation of the European employment strategy.

2.8. The CoR shares the Commission's view that lifelong learning constitutes the tool for creating a high level of education in Europe, which in turn would lead to increased growth.

Universities and colleges ought to design courses in close cooperation with industry to meet the needs of the labour market. Cooperation should be on a reciprocal basis and form an integral part of both education and research. Development of skills tailored to the labour market's need for them is one way to reduce unemployment as well as contributing expertise to sectors lacking in manpower. Lifelong learning for all, from kindergarten to college and in adult education, is a powerful force for achieving equality, personal development, democracy, a balanced labour market and hence increased growth.

The continuing work on lifelong learning requires the involvement of the CoR as representative of the local and regional levels in Europe.

2.9. The Committee of the Regions supports the Commission's drive to encourage mobility of labour. Some regions in Europe are seriously lacking in manpower while other regions have high unemployment. The Committee of the Regions points to the possibility of using e-learning to provide additional information on labour markets in other countries (including language training) and thus contribute to increased mobility in Europe.

Anticipating and managing change

2.10. The CoR endorses the objective of developing the Community strategy for the working environment. In that context, it is particularly important to study not only the physical working environment, but even more the psycho-social working environment. The Committee of the Regions proposes that measures to improve the psycho-social working environment be strengthened in the social policy agenda when it is reviewed in 2003.

(1) European governance — a White Paper, COM(2001) 428 final.

(2) 'Institutional representativeness of local public sector trade union and employers' organisations in the EU' — Final report, Catholic University of Louvain, Institute of Labour Sciences (Project V/001/97)

The effects of changes in the age pyramid at workplaces, together with less flexible forms of work organisation, should be looked at more closely by those concerned. Best practice in the workplace and cooperation between the social partners to develop the working environment are essential factors for success in achieving the goals proposed in the Community strategy.

Promoting social integration

2.11. The Committee of the Regions supports the Commission's drive to combat poverty and social exclusion. This work is particularly important in view of the large number of people who are dependent on social security benefit for long periods. The CoR wishes to emphasise that it is important for the objectives not to be specific.

2.12. The Committee wishes to stress the importance of combating illiteracy as part of the drive to combat poverty and social exclusion.

2.13. The Committee of the Regions points out, with reference to its earlier comments on indicators, that only those which are easy for Member States to interpret should be used and that as far as possible the indicators should be based on already accessible data. The Committee would stress in particular that the poverty and social exclusion indicators are interpreted differently in the Member States but that it is important to develop a set of commonly agreed indicators bringing in other key stakeholders in the debate, such as the Committee of the Regions at a European level and regional and local government at national level. The indicators must be adapted to each Member State's requirements.

2.14. The CoR welcomes the designation of 2003 as the European Year for people with disabilities and will seek to play an active role in the Year. The CoR considers that the opportunity should be taken during the Year to introduce a specific Directive on equal treatment of people with disabilities, along the lines of the race Directive.

Modernising social protection

2.15. Europe's social protection is good — one of the best in the world — but there are difficulties which must be debated. One of these is the large number of people who are dependent on social security for long periods. At a time when large parts of Europe are facing a shortage of manpower in several sectors, it is particularly important for all labour resources to be deployed and for the social security system to encourage participation in the labour market.

The Committee of the Regions proposes, before the evaluation of the social policy agenda in 2003, that this growing problem should be tackled in the drive to modernise social protection.

2.16. Demographic trends in Europe will influence the pension system, and the Committee of the Regions agrees there is a need to maintain reasonable pensions, safeguard a solidarity-based pension system and guarantee financial stability. The Committee wishes, however, to stress that this is a national matter, and calls for further discussion before the open method of coordination is applied in this sphere.

2.17. The Committee of the Regions believes that cooperation and exchange of experience are important in the fields of care for the elderly and the health and medical service. Any attempts at harmonisation should, however, be ruled out and Member States should have sole responsibility for provision of health care, using their own organisational and financial methods.

The Committee of the Regions calls for a wide-ranging discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of applying the open method of coordination in the fields of care for the elderly and the health and medical service. It is important for further coordination in this area to lead to positive results. In many of the Member States, the local and regional authorities are responsible for public health, care of the elderly and the health and medical service. The Committee of the Regions and the local and regional authorities responsible for these fields wish to participate in and contribute to the development work, and their influence on Community policy in these fields must be guaranteed.

2.18. The Committee of the Regions emphasises that the wording 'orientations in the field of health and care for the elderly' must not be inconsistent with Article 152(5)⁽¹⁾ which reads 'Community action in the field of public health shall fully respect the responsibilities of the Member States for the organisation and delivery of health services and medical care.'

Promoting gender equality

2.19. A sustainable society has to be based on gender equality. There must be greater involvement of women in decision-making, and the impact of decisions on women and men should be assessed. Gender equality is a priority area for both the CoR and the Commission. The CoR reiterates its call for annual statistics to be provided on gender-balance in all spheres of governance, and also asks that gender difference be included as a parameter in the research and the data analyses carried out in all the sectors covered, in order that objective comparisons can be made and best practice be identified.

⁽¹⁾ Treaty establishing the European Community.

The CoR considers that as well as gender and race, all other social groups referred to in Article 13 of the EC Treaty should be afforded legal protection from discrimination, i.e. on grounds of age, disability, religion or belief, and sexual orientation, and calls for specific initiatives to be taken to this effect.

Strengthening the social policy aspects of enlargement and of the European Union's external links

2.20. The Committee of the Regions feels it is important to take account of the challenges which the enlargement of the EU can involve, especially on social issues. It therefore endorses the work of evaluating and monitoring the social situation and the adoption of the *acquis* in the social sphere in the applicant countries.

Brussels, 10 October 2002.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Albert BORE

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on:

- the ‘**Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Towards an integrated European railway area**’,
- the ‘**Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on safety on the Community's railways and amending Council Directive 95/18/EC on the licensing of railway undertakings and Directive 2001/14/EC on the allocation of railway infrastructure capacity and the levying of charges for the use of railway infrastructure and safety certification**’,
- the ‘**Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Council Directive 96/48/CE and Directive 2001/16/EC on the interoperability of the trans-European rail system**’,
- the ‘**Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Council Directive 91/440/EEC on the development of the Community's railways**’,
- the ‘**Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a European Railway Agency**’, and
- the ‘**Recommendation for a Council Decision authorising the Commission to negotiate the conditions for Community accession to the Convention concerning International Carriage by Rail (COTIF) of 9 May 1980, as amended by the Vilnius Protocol of 3 June 1999**’

(2003/C 66/02)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Towards an integrated European area (COM(2002) 18 final);

having regard to the proposals for Directives on safety on the Community's railways, (COM(2002) 21 final — 2002/0022 (COD)), the interoperability of the trans-European rail system (COM(2002) 22 final — 2002/0023 (COD)), amending Council Directive 91/440/EEC on the development of the Community's railways (COM(2002) 25 final — 2002/0025 (COD));