Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on 'Improving the quality dimension of social and employment policy'

(2001/C 311/12)

On 25 June 2001, the Commission decided to consult the Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the above-mentioned communication.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 5 September 2001. The rapporteur was Mr Bloch-Lainé.

At its 384th plenary session on 12 and 13 September 2001 (meeting of 12 September 2001), the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 86 votes to none, with one abstention.

CAVEAT

Though the subject of this opinion is 'improving the quality dimension of social and employment policy', its main focus is on the quality of employment. It barely touches on the links with the other, far broader, facet of the subject, for the following reason: the Committee is fully aware of the interactions between several components of social policy and quality of employment. Clearly the latter is conditioned by external factors, first and foremost its close association with coherent, relevant social policies.

However, at the time when the study group started to draft the opinion, it did not yet have at its disposal the text of the planned Commission communication, which was in the process of preparation. Further, the deadlines did not allow time to draft a text covering the entire theme that could have been anything other than superficial. Lastly, and most important, it should be remembered that the ESC opinion was primarily intended as a response to the wish clearly expressed by the Belgian Minister for Employment and Equal Opportunities Policy in a message to the ESC President, stressing the importance attached by the Belgian Presidency in its programme to the quality of employment and hoping that the Committee would issue an opinion on this specific aspect.

1. Preamble: Some general reflections

1.1. The interest taken by the Member States and the EU institutions in quality of employment dates back many years. Much excellent work has been done in this field, one particular example being the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness, Employment, for which we have Jacques Delors to thank. A major leap forward came with the guidelines adopted at the LISBON European Council concerning the need for a 'global strategy', an 'active policy', tending to promote not only 'more' but also 'better quality' jobs. The NICE Council developed, expanded and pressed forward with this work, following the adoption of 'An agenda for social policy'. Lastly, in STOCKHOLM, the following year, conclusions specifying in greater detail the scope of future lines of action, along with precise and ambitious objectives, were adopted.

1.2. The quality of employment therefore emerged as a topic in its own right in the institutional debate on the European social model and the Union's economic strategy (cf. the Lisbon Council).

1.2.1. This timely recognition is part of a logical process in which it has been acknowledged that a judicious social policy is a major catalyst in boosting the efficiency and competitiveness of production.

1.2.2. In the process of building Europe constant emphasis is placed on QUALITY. What we call 'quality of life' clearly depends to a large extent not only, of course, on the number of jobs available, but also on the framework within which we work: freedom of choice, respect for human dignity, equal treatment, a fair wage, good working conditions, an appropriate working environment, health and safety, training opportunities, incentives, employee consultation and participation, etc.

1.2.3. The actors in the Europe venture have confirmed their resolve to ensure that jobs created within the EU contribute maximum added value and human fulfilment. Careful attention must be given to attaining this objective: measuring progress on the ground and performance in this field and taking all steps necessary to ensure that the reality matches the proclaimed objectives.

1.2.4. Europe, in conjunction with Member States, has a wide range of instruments for analysis and organised debate at its disposal to promote the creation of quality employment.
1.3. The undeniable complexity of this topic is no reason to support the criticism which is sometimes levelled and which is summed up — and then refuted — in a recent ILO document (1) the criterion of “decent work” is unworkable for excessively dissimilar situations and countries, unless it is relativised to the point of depriving it of any meaningful content."

Obviously circumstances differ from one economy to another. The foreseeable pace and margins of progress are not the same everywhere and factors such as SUBJECTIVITY with regard to evaluation of QUALITY often carry considerable weight in this area, as in others.

1.4. This opinion concentrates on three main aspects:

— highlighting certain OBSERVATIONS;
— addressing a few KEY THEMES;
— making some RECOMMENDATIONS.

2. Observations

2.1. A large number of sources of documentation, with very different methodological approaches, can be drawn on. For instance, the DUBLIN Foundation carried out a study in 2000, along the lines of two others undertaken in 1990 and 1995, into how employees perceived the quality of their jobs. The BILBAO Foundation compiled objective data founded on relevant comments. Finally, EUROSTAT collects and collates vital statistical data. However, problems remain concerning the updating and comparison of data and the standardisation of systems for statistical evaluation.

2.2. In order to underpin constructive and convincing recommendations, any diagnosis of quality of employment must draw on all useful sources available and collate the data collected. In this opinion the Committee in no way claims to present a comprehensive overview but has merely sought to highlight a few relevant points.

2.3. Safety and health

The European Agency for Health and Safety at Work has produced an excellent report on the state of occupational safety and health in the European Union. This opinion merely refers to the thrust of this document. The study’s ‘key points’ highlight the scope for progress.

2.4. The study carried out by the Dublin Foundation on how employees perceived changing patterns in a number of major components of quality of work, the following comments are worth noting (2):

— constant ‘stress’;
— more muscular and back complaints;
— increase in the intensity of work;
— slightly increased proportion of the workforce receiving training organised by their employer;
— persistent sexual segregation;
— temporary work and ‘flexibility’ do not lead to improved working conditions;
— violence and harassment continue to be major problems.

2.5. Other aspects

2.5.1. The Commission’s annual report on equal opportunities for women and men in the European Union (2000) stresses that considerable discrimination persists in the field of employment, even if there are signs of improvement.

3. Key themes

3.1. The Committee has focused attention on a number of topics selected with a view to:

— highlighting the close link, in this particular instance, between quality of employment and the economic performance of EU companies’ production or services,
— stressing the need for employment to reconcile as smoothly as possible the demands of working life and personal and family commitments,
— making the best possible use of the contributions made in earlier Committee opinions, which remain as relevant and topical as ever.

There are, of course, other themes worthy of consideration, for example remuneration. The fact that they have not been covered in this opinion does not mean that the ESC considers them to be of secondary importance.

(1) ‘Recent work issues and policies’ — January 2001

(2) We are dealing here, it is true, with subjective, perceived data rather than objective statistics. Nevertheless, we consider the data to be relevant, and challenge anybody who thinks otherwise to say so openly.
3.2. Safety/health *(1)*

3.2.1. How can European legislation be made more effective?

— The Committee has stressed and continues to highlight the importance of combining harmonisation with progress; this means that minimum key safety levels should not differ according to the size of the firm.

— Very careful attention must be paid to the specific situation of SMEs — not to exempt them from respecting common requirements, but to help them comply with them. This requires Community texts — as far as possible — to be uncomplicated, provide practical recommendations, be drawn up in a spirit of cooperation involving SME organisations, and distributed according to activity. It must also not be forgotten that there are medium-sized garages, hotel-restaurants, joineries, bakeries, etc., employing large numbers of people.

— Trade and industry and all players in the labour market, which also have a social responsibility, could be more active in the field of prevention, and support training and information campaigns in this area.

— The best way of achieving the desired harmonisation is not through detailed, formal and elaborate legislation. Effectiveness hinges on enforcement. Community legislation will not be enforced properly unless it complements national legislation.

— Legal monitoring of the transposition of a Community directive is necessary. However it is not sufficient and must be accompanied by assessments of how the directive is actually implemented, in conjunction with the social partners.

— The approach to dealing with health and safety risks must be adapted to new challenges, such as ‘stress’ in the workplace, muscle and back complaints, etc. These problems cannot be dealt with in the same way as traditional occupational accidents and illnesses. In this case — and many others — good and bad examples need to be identified, drawn upon and disseminated if useful directives are to be drafted.

3.2.2. Employability and health and safety

— Accidents in the workplace and other health and safety risks are first and foremost important from the human perspective. But they also involve considerable social costs for companies and public finances.

— It is far from certain that this observation is obvious to everybody today in Europe. Measures and instruments therefore need to be developed to explain and convince people.

— Non-compliance with existing standards is not always punished.

3.2.3. How should the new risks be addressed?

— These risks have not eliminated traditional risks, but have been added to them. They are here to stay and evolve more rapidly than the instruments designed to tackle them.

— If legislation is to avoid falling behind the situation it is intended to address, it is necessary now, more so than in the past, for Member States and the Commission to be given permanent means of monitoring and assessment.

— Trade and industry and all players in the labour market should play an active role in studying and researching new risks.

3.2.4. New forms of work

— Though it is still very difficult to measure the scale on which they exist, the health and safety risks connected with new forms of work, for example TELE-WORKING, and with the very nature and increasing prevalence of temporary and precarious jobs, are well known.

— Some national research and statistics institutes have made progress in compiling data on these new types of risk. Standardisation of this research in Member States should be encouraged, with the aim of providing better life-long protection to the workers concerned.

3.3. Older workers *(2)*

3.3.1. The Lisbon European Council set the objective of an employment rate ‘as close as possible to 70% by 2010’. Attaining such an objective entails raising the employment rate among ‘older workers’, in other words among those aged


*(2)* See also the ESC Opinion on ‘Older workers’, OJ C 14, 16.1.2001.
between 50 and 64. Although the employment rate in this category has been declining at differing speeds, there has been no exception to this trend or break with it in any of the EU Member States since the 1970s. The 2000 employment guidelines seek to rectify this trend. There is a lack of reliable, informative data in this field, especially as regards actual age of departure.

3.3.2. ‘Early exit’ from the labour market is generally more often imposed rather than chosen by those in question. This form of flexibility is a result of the labour market situation, companies’ restructuring strategies and corresponding public policies.

3.3.3. The employment of older workers has become an ‘adjustment margin’ for human resource management in companies and the public service and a domain for government action in the field of social protection.

3.3.4. As a consequence, in terms of quality of employment, there now exists a large pool of ‘middle-aged’ workers in companies and the public services considered to have no prospects, no value and whom there is a reluctance to promote and train. Aside from the human dimension, this constitutes a paradox: as from 2001 the 40-60 age group will account for the largest part of the EU’s active population.

3.3.5. However all the research bears witness to the fact that a large increase in early retirement exacerbates the depreciation of ageing workers in the labour market. In terms of recruitment, older workers suffer from discrimination. Very often the older or ageing worker feels that he is incapable of working or is unemployable.

3.3.6. Against this background, how is ‘quality of work’ relevant to the majority of older workers? How can the employment rate among employees over 50 or 55 be raised? What practical measures should be recommended? How can we respond to the demand by those concerned to play a more active part in the decisions affecting them and for arrangements to be tailored more closely to individual cases? How can greater allowance be made for the hopes of many workers in the 40-60 age group to retire at a reasonable age?

3.3.7. The so-called ‘serious trend’ needs to be reversed, but this will not occur automatically. Companies cannot just be asked to ‘make something new out of the old’. What is needed is, quite simply, to CHANGE THE CULTURE and RAISE AWARENESS, to persuade employees that working beyond the age of 55 is worthwhile and to ensure that companies and public services upgrade their assessment of the contribution which can be made by ‘ageing’ workers. Such an objective requires coming up with a BETTER FORWARD-LOOKING MANAGEMENT OF EMPLOYMENT OVER TIME in terms of recruitment and employment termination, continuous training, mobility within a company, flexible work organisation, ergonomics and task definition, and behavioural change within companies and the public services.

3.3.8. The EU institutions can take decisive action towards this goal:

3.3.8.1. by instigating debate on subjects such as reforming pay structures and replacing early retirement provisions by, for example, more flexible retirement provisions;

3.3.8.2. by taking action in the short term to:
— stimulate dialogue with the European social partners;
— develop the exchange of good practice;
— draw up a ‘code of good practice’ through dialogue with interested parties.

3.4. Non-discrimination

At this stage, and in the area under consideration, the Committee would like to see efforts focused on the following ‘touchstones’:

— gender equality;
— non-discrimination with regard to people choosing flexible working time or part-time work;
— adequate social protection cover for ‘atypical’ workers, i.e. those wishing or forced to be professionally or geographically mobile, to work on fixed-term or temporary contracts;
— development of ‘life-long learning’ for all workers, without discrimination;
— greater participation of these employees in the operation of companies and the services for which they work;
— attention to third-country nationals, and to the quality of the jobs to be offered to immigrant workers for which the EU will have a need;
— attention to workers with disabilities.

3.5. Access to training and upgrading of skills

In building Europe the clear-cut option is for a KNOWLEDGE-driven economy. In this connection the Committee would stress two of the many aspects of this immense challenge.
3.5.1. There is a danger that it may generate exclusion, a ‘multi-speed society’, where only a fraction of the workforce would have access to long-term facilities and opportunities so as to remain attractive on the job market. This scenario is not a mere fiction. It must be borne in mind so that we can forestall the emergence and slow, insidious and pernicious development of a new form of social split.

3.5.2. One area which could be increasingly affected are the many ‘traditional’ activities (catering, cleaning, repair workshops, service stations, community care jobs, craft industries) which have little scope on their own to offer their workforce training in new technologies and skills. Their employees are in danger of failing to keep up, in their working lives, with a constantly changing society. It is important to devise and implement arrangements for lifelong training and, at the very least, not to underestimate this problem.

3.6. Work and private and family life

3.6.1. Reference was made in the introduction to this opinion to the fact that quality of employment is a key component of quality of life.

Here we come across the blanket, convenient word, which 'means all things to everyone': FLEXIBILITY. This vague concept must, in the particular context with which we are concerned, be stripped of its quasi-ideological connotations: flexibility is a tool — not an ideal.

3.6.2. It is worth noting that this word encompasses a wide variety of individual aspirations as voiced by a considerable number of employees, prompted by a desire to live better: starting with a working schedule and hours 'of their CHOICE', considered as a vital prerequisite by private sector and public service employers keen to provide a competitive and effective service to their customers or users.

3.6.3. For the purpose of advocating action to be taken, a better overview and analysis is needed of the conditions governing the interrelationship between factors of a different nature and inspiration, and to examine their interactions.

3.6.4. Information on experiences, clashes of interest and consensus of views must be pooled and exchanged.

3.6.5. It could also be necessary to pay rather greater attention to tangible factors such as travelling time to and from work and the existence or absence of local social services and facilities provided for childcare.

3.7. Information and participation of the workforce

Here the emphasis is placed on one undisputed fact: quality of employment can only be enhanced if action is based on information and participation, with more and better means of involving employees in guiding the process of economic change. The wide variety of situations to be tackled and the desire among employees to be PARTNERS in decision making on matters affecting them means that no directive or regulation will have any chance, in this area, of attaining its objective if it is not in some measure CONTRACTUALLY BASED. All this is not incompatible with the goal of a KNOWLEDGE-driven European economy. Whether or not we wish it, such an economy cannot — if it is not to be inconsistent — be founded forever on the model of a hive of bees programmed by instinctive hierarchical genes, and on authoritarian, imposed doctrines. The contractual, concerted, participatory experience of our countries in the field of labour relations is a precious asset for the development of the European economic and social model.

4. Some recommendations

4.1. In addition to the creation of indicators and the exchange of good practice, the use of legislative instruments must also be considered, in order to secure progress on the quality dimension of employment.

4.2. These recommendations focus on the difficult, yet important, question of INDICATORS.

The need to make progress in this field was stressed by the STOCKHOLM European Council.

On 1 March 2001 the ESC issued an opinion (i) which listed the conditions to be met in order for the European indicators to be effective (see in particular points 1.2, 2.1, 2.3, 2.8 and 3.2).

4.3. It is not the intention of the Committee, at this stage, to give its views on the principle — debated both within the Council and the Commission — of whether in the future the field as a whole should be covered in a comprehensive manner, or whether efforts should be focused on a limited number of instruments. The Committee believes, however, that at the current stage optimal use should be made of a number of good existing indicators, and stresses that to be ‘good’ an indicator must be objective, be able to measure results, pinpoint the essence of a problem and offer a clear interpretation, must be accurate and balanced, must enable reliable comparison and must be periodically reviewed, updated and — if necessary — reformed without Member States, businesses and members of the public incurring any additional administrative and financial burden.

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(i) Structural indicators, OJ C 139, 11.5.2001.
4.4. The Committee recommends that, initially, particular attention be paid to the following 'possible indicators' set out in the Communication from the Commission (1), which relate to the 'Key themes' described in point 3 above.

4.4.1. Health and safety at work
— Composite indicators of accidents at work — fatal and serious — including costs.
— Stress levels and other difficulties concerning working relationships.

4.4.2. Older workers
— Employment rates.

4.4.3. Gender equality
— Gender pay gap, appropriately adjusted.

4.4.4. Life-long learning
— Proportion of workers undertaking training or other forms of life-long learning.

4.4.5. Working life and private, family life
— Opportunities for maternity and parental leave, and take-up rates

4.4.6. Information and involvement of workers
— Coverage of collective agreements and number of EU-wide companies with EU works councils with employee representatives.

4.4.7. Equal treatment for third-country nationals
— Non-discrimination, pay differences, type of contract, promotion and lifelong training.

4.5. As stressed by all the apposite reports and opinions on the subject, in addition to indicators it is necessary — not as a substitute but as a complement — to collect, collate and disseminate any useful information on experiments and projects carried out within the European Union. This applies not only of course to the successes, but also to the failures. This process of bench-marking is not intended as a grading process to distinguish between good and poor 'pupils', but as a means of pooling lessons learned.

The complexity and scale of efforts to ensure that progress continues to be made throughout the EU with regard to the quality of work are such that they require all available energy to be mustered, pooled and channelled.

4.6. The Economic and Social Committee, which represents various players from organised civil society, fervently wishes to make a contribution — in its consultative capacity — to the important practical issue of the quality of employment.


The President
of the Economic and Social Committee
Göke FRERICHS