

Opinion on the communication from the Commission and proposal for a Council Decision on the Commission's activities of analysis, research, cooperation and action in the field of employment⁽¹⁾

(96/C 18/21)

On 15 September 1995 the Council decided to consult the Economic and Social Committee, under Article 198 of the EC Treaty, on the above-mentioned proposal.

The Section for Social, Family, Educational and Cultural Affairs, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its Opinion on 5 October 1995. The Rapporteur was Mr Koryfidis.

At its 329th Plenary Session (meeting of 26 October 1995), the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following Opinion unanimously.

1. Introduction — The problem of employment: today's challenge for the European Union

1.1. The publication of the White Paper (December 1993) and the European Council summits in Brussels (December 1993), Corfu (June 1994) and Essen (December 1994) placed the problem of employment/unemployment at the very centre of European political, economic and social thinking and research.

1.2. The research into and approach to the question throughout that period brought out the true scale of the problem and led to the following key specific conclusions as to its nature, dimensions and possible ramifications:

- Employment is not a secondary factor, but lies at the very heart of economic growth.
- Economic recovery alone is not enough to solve employment problems.
- These problems require closer cooperation between the Commission and the Member States, as well as more effective coordination, particularly in the fields of analysis, research, cooperation and action on employment and the labour market.

1.3. The above conclusions — which are commonly accepted — also bring to the forefront the social dimension of the problem: this dimension could be the starting-point for the search for its solution.

At all events, it is worth pointing out that problems such as unemployment are damaging to the Community idea and leave large groups of particularly vulnerable

European citizens on the margin, in a state of despair and embittered with regard to the European Union itself.

1.4. In view of the above, solving the employment problem is indeed TODAY'S CHALLENGE for the European Union.

2. General comments

2.1. Data and experience on the scale, causes and likely development of the problem

2.1.1. For sometime now, the Commission's monitoring, analysis, research and action in the field of employment have been conditioned by two factors:

- the prevailing political approach to employment (seen as a secondary factor for growth); and consequently
- the low-level funding (ECU 10 million per annum for the current programme).

2.1.2. Nonetheless, the achievements to date are far from insignificant. The European employment observatory (MISEP) and the Community System of Documentation on Employment (SYSDÉM) have much to offer.

Their data have demonstrated the scale of the employment problem and formed a basis for studies which led to the new approach to and new proposals on employment and unemployment in Europe.

2.1.3. Furthermore, the LEDA programme (Local Employment Development Action), LEI (Local Employment Initiatives targeted at women), ERGO (reintegration of the long-term unemployed in the labour market) and the development of transnational networks — TURN (Trade Union Regional Network which is

⁽¹⁾ JO No C 235, 9. 9. 1995, p. 8.

active in the area of job creation and vocational training for the unemployed) and EGLEI (an International Association of Local Development Agencies) — undoubtedly constitute positive Commission achievements.

2.1.4. The new approach and the placing of the employment question at the top of the European Union's priorities open up new prospects for the Commission's activity in this area to acquire a different dimension, scope and quality.

2.2. *The ESC's views on employment and unemployment*

2.2.1. For some time the ESC has been pointing out to the Council and the Commission the need to adopt a new employment strategy linked with, and promoting growth.

2.2.2. In particular, in its annual Opinion of 1992 on the social situation, the Committee, underlining the need to improve the situation on the labour market, proposed boosting job-creating investment and making the most of the Commission's capacity to support any relevant efforts by the governments of the Member States.

2.2.2.1. With a view to combating unemployment, the ESC, mainly in its Opinion on the Green Paper on social policy, endorsed the principle that each worker must have access throughout his/her working life to further training, which must be regarded as an integral part of employment policies.

At the same time it proposed the application of a preventive policy for the specialization and retraining of workers threatened with unemployment.

2.2.3. In the light of the implementation of the new Treaty on European Union and the publication of the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment, the ESC considered (in a Resolution of 1 June 1994) 'that the Council should formally put the problem of employment in the European Union at the top of the list of priorities and ensure that this is reflected in the broad economic policy guidelines provided for by Article 103 of the EC Treaty'. The same Resolution includes the aims of reducing unemployment and creating jobs, especially for young people.

2.2.4. Equally important and positive, because they develop some of its own views, are many other ESC Opinions which relate to the subject, e.g. Opinions on the Council Recommendation on access to continuing vocational training, the Action Programme on vocational training policy, etc.

Even more important are the ESC's relevant Own-initiative Opinions, relating to the effects of new technologies on the employment situation, youth unemployment, etc.

2.2.5. Finally, a substantial and valuable contribution to solving the problem is likely to be made by the coming special Plenary Session of the ESC (October 1995).

3. Specific comments

3.1. The ESC agrees in principle with the Commission's observation that after the Essen Summit there is a hope of creating the preconditions for a way out of the employment crisis.

However, it stresses that this hope will need to be sustained and backed with specific direct measures in cases where additional unemployment problems are created by central policies of the European Union.

3.2. On the assumption that overcoming any kind of crisis, however serious, depends on a full understanding of that crisis and its causes, the ESC also agrees in general terms with the new strategy of analysis, research, cooperation and action which the Commission proposes for the employment field. However, the social partners should be directly associated in advance with setting priorities for the type of studies and measures to be undertaken. This aim could be achieved by setting up a consultative committee.

3.2.1. The ESC regards as particularly important, inter alia, the Commission's comments and planned actions on conditions affecting job creation and job losses, investigations to be carried out, and correlation of new jobs with economic growth and the global nature of the employment problem.

The ESC certainly has a substantial role to play in the development of these measures.

3.3. The ESC stresses that the Commission should give higher priority and more specificity to actions implementing measures in favour of the groups particularly hard hit by unemployment, namely young people, the long-term unemployed, older workers and unemployed women. The ESC would also stress that priority must be given to ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged categories, for which the contribution of 'social economy' organizations should also be used.

3.4. Higher priority and more specific action are also needed for the encouragement and promotion of job creation initiatives, mainly at regional and local level.

This requirement is increased by the fact that these new jobs can meet new needs, e.g. in the environment and social services sectors.

3.5. The ESC, which always regards as central the question of informing European citizens on, and familiarizing them with, the views, decisions and activities of the European Union bodies, approves the development of a more dynamic policy on the dissemination of information collected on employment and the relevant policies of the Union.

3.6. Finally, although the ESC would like to see problems of this kind solved at local and regional level, it takes a very positive view of the role which the Commission is assuming in the effort to find a solution.

Moreover, the global nature of the factors creating the problem, and the need for coordination and for informed practical participation of all those involved in the problem, call for the promotion of partnership at all levels — i.e. the policy proposed by the Commission.

It would be useful if initiatives were taken, the matter studied and consideration given to the possibilities for an international dialogue with a view to seeking global solutions.

The World Conference on social development was the start of such a dialogue. The success of the dialogue on liberalization of international trade is a good example to follow.

3.7. At all events, the ESC stresses that the search for solutions to the employment crisis and ways to combat unemployment must be stepped up even more.

The Commission's specific proposal for action provides a very good tool for the effort of investigation, description and clarification of the problem, and for finding the right solution.

All possible solutions to the crisis, however, depend on growth, and the final assessment must be made in that context. The battle must be joined even more energetically in that area.

Relevant existing Community activities, such as the Trans-European Networks, must be developed more rapidly, while new developmental actions must be pursued, relating in particular to the quality of life, the European social model and the environment.

3.8. The content and outcome of the 1996 Intergovernmental Conference will ultimately show whether all the activity surrounding the problem of employment/unemployment has had any substantial impact.

The ESC would emphasize the need for that Conference to open up the prospect of a European Union which is acceptable to its citizens, strong in many ways, and characterized by cooperation and solidarity.

In such a European Union the problem of employment/unemployment must be acknowledged and tackled as a political problem. The Europe of the 21st century must not end up as a society of unemployed paupers.

Done at Brussels, 26 October 1995.

The President
of the Economic and Social Committee
Carlos FERRER
