

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (2010)

COM(2007) 797 final — 2007/0278 (COD)

(2008/C 224/24)

On 30 January 2008, the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

Proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (2010).

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 7 May 2008. The rapporteur was Krzysztof Pater and the co-rapporteur was Erika Koller.

At its 445th plenary session, held on 28 and 29 May 2008 (meeting of 29 May 2008), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 116 votes to 1, with 5 abstentions:

1. EESC's position in brief

1.1 The European Economic and Social Committee welcomes the Commission proposal establishing the European Year 2010 for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. It is a valuable initiative to raise public awareness of persistent pockets of poverty and marginalisation in Europe and to build support for effective ways of tackling these problems.

1.2 The EESC welcomes the multifaceted approach to poverty and social exclusion, which cannot be reduced only to the persistence of relative income inequalities. In order to get more effectively across the message of intolerability of poverty and social marginalisation in a continent as wealthy as Europe, as well as to win the public support required for their effective resolution, the events of the European Year 2010 should, apart from relative poverty, be based on measures of poverty reflecting the scale of actual deprivation, the areas affected and the depth of the problem, while taking into account disparities across the EU.

1.3 The European Year 2010 should have clear, select, overarching themes. First, to reduce poverty and social exclusion through professional and social activation, more and better social support systems and programs are needed. Thus, social policy is truly a productive factor. Second, reduction of poverty and social exclusion is in the interest of every citizen and that is why everyone should contribute to the achievement of this objective. It should be borne in mind, however, that the task of tackling poverty and marginalisation is primarily a job for political decision-makers, and thus for government bodies and other bodies involved in subsequent implementation as well as all social actors.

1.4 The European Year 2010 should be an opportunity to raise public awareness of the need to modernise and strengthen the European social model and of the resulting consequences. Active inclusion is crucial in preserving and consolidating the cohesion and solidarity of society as the world faces a financial and food crisis at a time of globalisation and demographic change in Europe. However, this will involve changes to the current lifestyles of many Europeans. Fears about job precariousness are rising. The events of the Year should be used to broaden public support for those reforms.

1.5 The European Year 2010 should also provide a platform for public debate on the ways of protecting and advancing social cohesion amidst growing income disparities among Europeans. Innovative and integrated public policy responses will need to be found.

— The EESC points out that a successful campaign against poverty and exclusion requires the involvement of many areas of policy. Thus, the fair distribution of prosperity must be given much greater political priority than hitherto, also at EU level.

— The objectives of the Year set out in the proposal for a decision should better reflect the importance of an active policy to tackle poverty and social exclusion in achieving the goals of the EU growth and jobs strategy. ⁽¹⁾

Their effectiveness will be predicated on continuous involvement of the social partners and civil society organisations as well as on active involvement and participation of citizens in local community-building.

⁽¹⁾ See for example the EESC opinion of 18.1.2007 on Taking stock of the reality of European society today, point 2.2. Rapporteur: Mr Olsson (OJ C 93, 27.4.2007); the EESC opinion of 13.7.2005 on the Communication from the Commission on the Social Agenda, point 6.1. Rapporteur: Mrs Engelen-Kefer (OJ C 294, 25.11.2005).

1.6 The EESC believes that the operational side of the planned initiative is well thought-out. Worthy of special mention is the fact that the proposal takes proper account of country-specific features assuming close cooperation with social partners and other civil society institutions as well as direct participation of people affected by poverty and social exclusion.

1.7 The EESC welcomes the fact that the funding earmarked for implementing the goals of the Year is the largest amount ever assigned to such an initiative in the EU, but given the scale of the planned measures, it nonetheless calls for this funding to be increased.

2. Summary of the Commission proposal

2.1 The aim of the decision to designate 2010 as the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion is to contribute to the attainment the goal of making 'a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty', which was established in the Lisbon Strategy and reaffirmed in the new European Social Agenda for 2005-2010 ⁽²⁾.

2.2 Measures relating to the Year will concentrate on four objectives: (1) **recognition** that poor and socially excluded people are entitled to a dignified life and to participate in society, (2) **ownership**, i.e. all members of society taking joint responsibility for reducing poverty and marginalisation, (3) **cohesion**, the belief that maintaining social cohesion is in everyone's interest and (4) **commitment**, stressing the political will of the EU to treat combating poverty and social exclusion as a priority.

2.3 These measures, to be taken at EU and national level, will include meetings and conferences, information and promotional campaigns as well as studies and reports. They should involve all the stakeholders and provide an opportunity that the needs and views of those affected by poverty and exclusion be voiced and heard.

2.4 A sum of EUR 17 million from the EU budget has been earmarked for projects relating to the Year. With the addition of anticipated co-funding from public and private bodies in Member States this figure may increase to EUR 26.175m.

⁽²⁾ Communication from the Commission on the Social Agenda, COM (2005) 33 final, 9.2.2005, point 2.2., p. 9.

3. General observations on the objective of the planned initiative

3.1 The European Economic and Social Committee welcomes the Commission proposal, which, if implemented properly, could help to raise public awareness and stimulate public discussion how to resolutely and effectively tackle poverty and social exclusion.

3.2 The EESC believes that the theme of the Year is important and topical. Not only will it be noticed by the public, but will also help keep it focused. The EESC supports the general and detailed objectives, the specific themes of the Year as well as the proposed methods of implementation. The remarks below are intended to enhance the public profile and political effectiveness of the Year.

3.3 The protection and improvement of the quality of life of all Europeans are predicated on their commitment that poverty and social marginalisation need to be dealt with effectively in the relatively affluent Europe. The events of the Year should reinforce this commitment among Europeans of all social and economic strata.

3.4 It is, therefore, important that the events of the year built on the knowledge and experience accumulated since the launch of the European strategy to combat poverty and social exclusion by the 2000 Nice European Council. Synergies should be ensured with the events organised by others, e.g., the Council of Europe, in the context of the High-Level Task Force report on social cohesion in the 21st century ⁽³⁾, and the United Nations, in the context of the annual observance of October 17 — the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty.

3.5 The EESC recalls that a number of issues and themes dealt with in previous opinions ⁽⁴⁾, should find its rightful place in the events of the Year:

- supporting modernised social policy as a truly productive factor capable of professional activation of all able-bodied people and social activation of all;

⁽³⁾ Cf. 'Towards an Active, Fair and Socially Cohesive Europe' Report of High-Level Task Force on Social Cohesion in the 21st Century, Council of Europe, Strasbourg 26 October 2007, TFSC (2007) 31 E.

⁽⁴⁾ EESC opinion of 13.7.2005 on 'Communication from the Commission on the Social Agenda', rapporteur: Mrs Engelen-Kefer (OJ C 294 of 25.11.2005); EESC opinion of 29.9.2005 on 'Poverty among women in Europe', rapporteur: Mrs King (OJ C 24 of 31.1.2006); EESC opinion of 6.7.2006 on 'Social cohesion: fleshing out a European social model', rapporteur: Mr Ehnmark (OJ C 309 of 16.12.2006); EESC opinion of 13.12.2006 on 'Voluntary activity: its role in European society and its impact', rapporteur: Ms Koller and co-rapporteur: Ms Gräfin zu Eulenburg (OJ C 325 of 30.12.2006); EESC opinion of 18.1.2007 on 'Taking stock of the reality of European society today', rapporteur: Mr Olsson (OJ C 93 of 27.4.2007); EESC opinion of 25.10.2007 on 'Credit and social exclusion in an affluent society', rapporteur: Mr Pegado Liz (OJ C 44 of 16.2.2008); EESC opinion of 13.12.2007 on 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Promoting solidarity between the generations', rapporteur: Mr Jahier (OJ C 120 of 16.05.2008).

- modernisation of the European Social Model, broadly conceived, so that it can successfully address the new challenges in the areas of employment, social inclusion and combating poverty, and the social effects of globalisation, to maintain Europe as ‘a democratic, green, competitive, solidarity-based and socially inclusive welfare area for all [its] citizens ...’⁽⁵⁾;
- the need for more effective policies directed at labour market integration of groups discriminated against or otherwise disadvantaged, in particular the working poor and people in precarious jobs⁽⁶⁾;
- the need for an open public debate and support for the direction of that modernisation toward activation to employment and social participation; EESC has stressed that if ‘the European Social Model is to be of value in the shaping of the European society of tomorrow, it has to be a dynamic model, open for challenge, change and reform’ and that ‘the European Social Model will be relevant only as long as it is appreciated and supported by the citizens of Europe’;⁽⁷⁾
- strong emphasis on local action, social partner, civil society involvement and encouragement as well as appreciation of civic activism, especially in combating poverty and social exclusion;
- the need for comprehensive approaches, reaching beyond traditional employment and social policies, toward economic, educational, regional, cultural, and infrastructural policies, especially in combating poverty and social exclusion;
- acknowledging and recognising that men and women experience poverty differently and that social policies should be crafted accordingly;
- the need for a more effective Open Method of Coordination at the European level in the area of combating poverty and social exclusion;
- placing action against poverty and social exclusion in the international context, especially by promoting basic rights at work and decent working standards throughout the world.

⁽⁵⁾ See EESC opinion of 6.7.2006 on ‘Social cohesion: fleshing out a European social model’, § 2.1.2.5. Rapporteur: Mr Ehnmark (OJ C 309 of 16.12.2006).

⁽⁶⁾ Cf. EESC own-initiative opinion of 12.7.2007 on Employment of priority categories (Lisbon Strategy), rapporteur: Mr Greif (OJ C 256, 27.10.2007).

⁽⁷⁾ See EESC opinion of 6.7.2006 on ‘Social cohesion: fleshing out a European social model’, §§ 1.8, 1.9. Rapporteur: Mr Ehnmark (OJ C 309 of 16.12.2006).

Below, the EESC develops some aspects of those ideas, as especially relevant to the events of the Year.

3.6 During the Year, particular attention should be drawn to the following possible positive measures:

- the impact of the fight against undeclared work;
- active measures to help people back into work;
- investment in industrial activities and services that generate jobs and an assessment of potential negative or exacerbating impacts, including:
 - the future economic growth, during and after the Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion;
 - the energy and food situation of the most vulnerable communities or communities living in poverty or extreme poverty.

4. Get the message across more effectively

4.1 The decision establishing the Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion highlights that 78 million people in the EU, i.e. 16 % of the population, are at risk of poverty. The EESC believes that to convey the political message of the Year effectively, alongside the usual indicator of relative income poverty, other measures of poverty, showing its persistence and actual deprivation many Europeans still suffer from should also be referred to and used. Consequently, the events of the Year should equally refer to a comprehensive set of indicators of relative and absolute poverty to sensitise the general public to the situations which they represent and instil the sense of their intolerability.

4.2 Furthermore, the EESC points out that the indicators used ‘describe’ the problem of poverty and social exclusion. With the challenges to social cohesion in the EU and the resulting modernisation of the European Social Model, it is important that those indicators imply a balanced public policy response, comprising of better income redistribution and properly financed and managed policies of flexicurity in the labour market and of active inclusion. Such ‘dynamic model’ of social and employment policies the EESC suggested in its respective opinion⁽⁸⁾.

⁽⁸⁾ See EESC opinion of 6.7.2006 on ‘Social cohesion: fleshing out a European social model’, § 2.4. Rapporteur: Mr Ehnmark (OJ C 309 of 16.12.2006).

4.3 The EESC welcomes the fact that the Commission has recognised that the multifaceted nature of poverty and social exclusion requires adequate measures. In the Communication on the European Social Agenda for the period 2005-2010, which set out, *inter alia*, to persuade Member States to consolidate, integrate and streamline measures to combat poverty and social exclusion, the Commission rightly complemented the relative poverty indicator with that of persistent poverty⁽⁹⁾. When later proposing that social protection, healthcare and long-term care also be subject to enhanced coordination, the Commission drew attention to the need for greater emphasis on 'indicators measuring deprivation'⁽¹⁰⁾.

4.4 In view of the above, the EESC believes that the decision on the European Year 2010 should be based on measures of poverty which better bring out the scale of deprivation, the areas affected and the depth of the problem. This would increase public awareness and support for labour market and social protection policies at EU and national levels, addressed to people and communities threatened or affected by deep and absolute poverty⁽¹¹⁾.

5. The main themes of the Year, its objectives and types of activities

5.1 Poverty is a multifaceted phenomenon with risks distributed unevenly in society. Especially when compounded, they render certain groups particularly vulnerable.

⁽⁹⁾ The rate of persistent poverty shows the number of people affected by relative poverty in two of the last three years. (definition by EURO-STAT).

⁽¹⁰⁾ Communication from the Commission Working together, working better: A new framework for the open method of coordination of social protection and inclusion policies in the European Union, COM (2005) 706 final, 22.12.2005, point 3.5, p. 9.

⁽¹¹⁾ In its opinions the EESC has often referred to more specific descriptions of poverty, e.g., turning attention to categories of people who 'suffer hardship' and 'are greatly disadvantaged' (EESC opinion of 13.12.2007 on 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Promoting solidarity between the generations', §2.5, rapporteur: Mr Jahier, OJ C 120 of 16.5.2008), to persistent poverty (EESC opinion of 29.9.2005 on 'Poverty among women in Europe', §1.7, rapporteur: Mrs King, OJ C 24 of 31.01.2006), and to poverty 'in qualitative terms', meaning 'a lack or inadequacy of material resources for meeting the vital needs of an individual' (EESC opinion of 25.10.2007 on 'Credit and social exclusion in an affluent society', §3.1.3, rapporteur: Mr Pegado Liz, OJ C 44 of 16.2.2008). On one occasion it even stated: 'The Committee strongly recommends that the Commission revisits the definition of poverty as it only highlights the overt causes of poverty and underestimates the level [of] the poverty of women and the impact of that poverty' (EESC opinion of 29.9.2005 on 'Poverty among women in Europe', §2.1, rapporteur: Mrs King, OJ C 24 of 31.1.2006). Naturally, that deficiency of the relative poverty measure does not only apply to women poverty, but to poverty generally.

5.2 Poverty is usually related to unemployment, especially long-term unemployment. Therefore, as the 2007 *Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion-JIR* reads, '[a] job is the best safeguard against poverty and social exclusion....'⁽¹²⁾ But, as the *JIR* also states, it cannot be the only safeguard. The phenomenon of the working poor makes that strikingly evident.

5.3 Poverty may also be related to low skills or lack of skills required in an available job or to skills not adequate to hold a quality job, offering adequate wage. Groups especially susceptible to this risk are young people, particularly early drop-outs, and the older workers.

5.4 People may be trapped into poverty by poorly structured income support systems which discourage activity in the official labour market and ultimately condemn them to poverty also in the old age.

5.5 Family structure may also be a risk: single-earner families, especially when headed by single-parents, families with three or more children. Family breakdown or loss of job, causing the loss of home is a potentially dangerous situation.

5.6 Similarly, persons of poor health (e.g. due to age), cognitive limitations, persons with disabilities, especially when low-skilled, substance abusers, are also groups at great risk.

5.7 Also at risk are persons living in peripheral or otherwise underprivileged areas.

5.8 A special at-risk-of-poverty category form migrants and ethnic minorities who apart from often inadequate social and language skills and/or cultural adjustment, may be also discriminated against.

5.9 The examples listed above show the magnitude of the challenge involved and the complexity of effective public policy responses. If poverty and social exclusion are to be significantly reduced, efforts by public authorities of all levels need to be complemented by these of the social partners, the civil society organisations, and of the individuals. They also reveal a paradox:

⁽¹²⁾ *Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2007*, European Commission (European Communities: 2007), p. 45.

if all able-bodied persons are to be socially integrated primarily through employment to contribute to Europe's economic growth and alleviate its population decline, more and better support systems and programs are needed, rather than less. Those should be the two leading themes of the Year.

5.10 The EESC believes that the general and specific objectives of the Year as well as the chosen activity themes seek to achieve a new balance between the social requirement to be economically active and the individual's need for security. The need for such an adjustment stems from globalisation, demographic change, technological progress and the evolution of the European labour market, involving significant changes in the life style of many Europeans. Furthermore, labour market and social policies need to be modernised and improved to facilitate the necessary transitions and provide people with a sustainable safety net that is properly managed and financed. While some take advantage of the opportunities of the new labour markets and activation programs, others perceive them as threatening to their social and professional status. In view of the EESC, the events of the Year ought to address those genuine concerns ⁽¹³⁾.

5.11 When it comes to people at risk of unemployment and/or social exclusion, current emphasis on labour market activation of all people capable of working allows the society to make use of their talents while satisfying the individual need for vocational and social advancement ⁽¹⁴⁾. Apart from appropriate income support, an increasing emphasis is also being placed on better access of all to social services, particularly to those which help individuals to improve, update or change their qualifications or help them to maintain their health. Yet, to benefit from those opportunities, one is asked for far more individual activity, initiative, intellectual effort and cooperation with various support services than ever before. There is a real need to communicate the purpose of policies requiring that effort to gain public support for them ⁽¹⁵⁾. Events of the Year should help to achieve this. The objectives of the Year should better reflect

⁽¹³⁾ See EESC opinion of 6.7.2006 on 'Social cohesion: fleshing out a European social model', esp. §§ 1.6–1.8, 2.3.1–2.3.5. Rapporteur: Mr Ehnmark (OJ C 309 of 16.12.2006). See also EESC opinion of 18.1.2007 on 'Taking stock of the reality of European society today', esp. § 2.4. Rapporteur: Mr Olsson (OJ C 93 of 27.4.2007).

⁽¹⁴⁾ *The social situation in the European Union 2005–2006: The Balance between Generations in an Ageing Europe*, European Commission, (European Communities: 2007), p. 17, summarizes the survey of life satisfaction of EU citizens, that 'the importance of jobs for life satisfaction goes far beyond the income they procure'.

⁽¹⁵⁾ 'Take the issues to the citizens of Europe' was a key recommendation of the EESC opinion of 6.7.2006 on 'Social cohesion: fleshing out a European social model', §2.6. Rapporteur: Mr Ehnmark (OJ C 309 of 16.12.2006).

the importance of an active policy to tackle poverty and social exclusion in achieving the goals of the EU growth and jobs strategy ⁽¹⁶⁾. That a modernised and enhanced social policy improves the functioning of the labour market and contributes to job creation should be better communicated and convincingly evidenced in the events of the Year. Likewise, that properly designed income support measures benefit those at risk of unemployment and social marginalisation by reducing the various pressures that displace them from the official labour market; they thus contribute to the reduction of the informal economy.

5.12 The draft decision includes several statements which require further clarification.

5.13 The EESC points out that referring to 'children, lone parents, the elderly, migrants and ethnic minorities, disabled people, the homeless, prisoners, women and children who are victims of violence, and severe substance abusers' ⁽¹⁷⁾ as groups that are particularly at risk of poverty and social exclusion, without further qualifying them, might have the opposite of the desired effect. These groups encompass both people who are at risk of poverty and those who are not. As indicated above, it is usually the lack of adequate skills and/or high ratio of family members to income-earners that put these categories of people at risk of poverty.

6. Social cohesion and the persistence and growth of income disparities

6.1 The European Year 2010 can also provide an opportunity for public debate on the existing and new challenges to social solidarity and social cohesion as Europe moves toward the knowledge-based society and economy and cope with the demographic change ⁽¹⁸⁾. Such reflection is particularly needed in a continent which does have the means to decisively reduce poverty and social exclusion.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Cf. e.g., EESC opinion of 18.1.2007 on 'Taking stock of the reality of European society today', § 2.2. Rapporteur: Mr Olsson (OJ C 93 of 27.4.2007); EESC opinion of 13.7.2005 on 'Communication from the Commission on the Social Agenda', § 6.1. Rapporteur: Mrs Engelen-Kefer (OJ C 294 of 25.11.2005).

⁽¹⁷⁾ Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (2010), [COM(2007) 797 final, 2007/0278 (COD)], 12.12.2007, Preamble, para. (11), p. 9.

⁽¹⁸⁾ The EESC was concerned with some 'social effects of the knowledge revolution' and suggested that they need to be addressed by the social dialogue already in its opinion of 6.7.2006 on 'Social cohesion: fleshing out a European social model', §2.4.5. Rapporteur: Mr Ehnmark (OJ C 309 of 16.12.2006).

6.2 Meanwhile, too many young people do not have, upon leaving schools, the literacy and numeracy skills required for a successful career in the new economy. Effective remedies are needed not only to stave off their social marginalisation but also to satisfy the economy's demand for quality workers. Furthermore, Europe faces growing bifurcation of the labour market into the high-skilled, high-paying segment and the low-skilled, low-paying one, resulting in income disparities. A vision of maintaining social justice and social cohesion while preserving the competitiveness of EU in the global economy needs to be developed and accepted by the Europeans.

6.3 Top-down measures by governments will not ensure social cohesion unless complemented by grassroots initiatives of the citizens. In the same way that the Nice European Council of 2000 recognised the participation of civil society organisations as the key to effectively mobilising efforts to combat poverty and social exclusion, the EESC believes that the importance of individual involvement of all citizens in building inclusive communities should also be acknowledged and encouraged throughout the Year. In this context, it would be important to convey the message that civic involvement is in the interest of every member of the community, irrespective of their economic or social status.

6.4 EESC recalls its opinion on voluntary activity which, *inter alia*, reads that 'governments of the Member States should be encouraged to frame national policies on voluntary activity and strategies ensuring that voluntary activity is encouraged and recognised. These national policies should also cover the role of infrastructure in facilitating voluntary activity.'⁽¹⁹⁾ It implies that people wishing to offer their time and skills for the communities in which they live should, at the minimum, not be deterred from doing so by any legal or bureaucratic obstacles.⁽²⁰⁾ While the EESC still holds that voluntary activity deserves a separate European Year, relevant aspects of civic participation should be highlighted also in the events of the Year 2010.

6.5 EESC urges that the events of the Year should avoid giving an impression that under the currently promoted policies of flexicurity and active inclusion, the requirement of effort to

⁽¹⁹⁾ EESC opinion of 13.12.2006 on 'Voluntary activity: its role in European society and its impact', § 1.2. Rapporteur: Ms Koller and co-rapporteur: Ms Gräfin zu Eulenburg (OJ C 325 of 30.12.2006).

⁽²⁰⁾ EESC opinion of 13.12.2007 on 'Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Promoting solidarity between the generations' stresses the benefits of civic involvement also by elderly people and urges more research into the issue of active aging, § 4.5., rapporteur: Mr Jahier (OJ C 120 of 16.5.2008).

climb out of unemployment and poverty (thus contributing to societal cohesion) is restricted to employers, governments and the beneficiaries of labour market and social protection programs. Instead, they should drive home the message that this responsibility rests with every citizen.

6.6 Another issue worth considering is that amidst persistent or even growing economic disparities, maintenance of social cohesion may also be facilitated by developing high-quality public spaces (urban spaces, schools, universities, libraries, parks, recreational facilities), where people of various walks of life and varying social and economic status would want to congregate and spend time.

6.7 Most of the new challenges and dilemmas facing social cohesion and public policy may be addressed under the general objectives of the draft decision. They should, however, be better articulated to stimulate useful public debate over the course of the Year. The possible courses of action to promote social cohesion proposed here may complement the 2010 debate on the ideas of active social inclusion and effective labour market policies.

7. Social policy in the broad sense

7.1 In the EESC's view, the proposed concept for the Year, particularly the range of activities, will also make it possible to highlight and raise awareness of the fact that achieving the Lisbon Strategy goal of making a decisive impact on eradicating poverty and social exclusion by 2010 will require multi-faceted measures⁽²¹⁾.

7.2 Educational measures carried out over the course of the Year should include building public awareness in individual Member States of the factors that determine the size of a future pension and encourage people to take steps that can secure them a decent life in retirement.

7.3 The EESC believes that the issue of how the European Central Bank might use its powers under the Treaty to join in efforts to combat poverty and social exclusion also deserves attention in the events of the Year.

⁽²¹⁾ Although the Lisbon Strategy ends in 2010, it is a permanent point of reference as regards programme documents and concrete measures at EU and national level. Although no decision has yet been taken, the Lisbon Strategy can be expected to continue in some form after 2010, especially as the Strategy's employment and social goals will not be fully realised by 2010.

7.4 The EESC believes it needs to be shown that social marginalisation could be curtailed by policies transcending the traditional realm of labour market and social protections, such as spatial planning policies preventing ghettoization of poverty, transportation policies reducing geographic barriers to social mobility, and economic policies developing peripheral areas and underpinning services of general interest and distribution policy, in order to reverse the trend which has been observed for years towards ever greater disparities between rich and poor.

7.5 In this connection, the EESC draws attention to differences between national circumstances, which have become more marked since EU enlargement. As stated in one study, 'even "the poorest" in "rich" Member States suffer less deprivation than "the most well-off" in "poor states"' ⁽²²⁾. This highlights the importance of effective action toward socio-economic cohesion and reduction of current economic disparities across the EU to diminish the areas of deprivation and social exclusion. This, in turn, would enable further development of the Open Method of Coordination of social policy in the EU. ⁽²³⁾ It is a point worth special attention and consideration in the events of the Year.

8. Comments on the implementation of the planned initiative

8.1 The EESC believes that the operational side of the Year has been well thought out as it takes appropriate account of national priorities and sensibilities (such as the delicate matter of the labour market and social integration of immigrants and ethnic minorities). The fact that it establishes close cooperation with social partners and civil society institutions is also important.

8.2 The emphasis placed on the participation of the social partners and civil society organisations in achieving the objectives of the Year reflects their indispensability in achieving the social agenda of the Lisbon Strategy, which has been affirmed in 2000 by the Nice European Council in the European strategy to combat poverty and social exclusion. Today more than ever, government action must be complemented, corrected and consolidated by means of grass-root initiatives. It is also important that in the design and implementation of social policy, the voice of those it seeks to support is duly heard. It is therefore appropriate that these organisations have been invited to actively cooperate in implementing the goals of the European Year 2010.

8.3 The Committee welcomes the fact that the funding earmarked for implementing the goals of the Year is the highest amount ever appropriated in the EU to such an initiative. However, having considered the detailed measures listed in the Annex to the proposed decision, the EESC calls for increased funding for measures associated with the Year to ensure effectiveness.

8.4 The EESC also welcomes the fact that in designing and implementing the activities of the Year, the different ways in which men and women experience poverty and social exclusion will be recognised.

8.5 The EESC believes that the priorities of the European Year, listed in the Annex, should be expanded to cover poverty among people in precarious employment. The issues surrounding persons with disabilities should be considered separately and not lumped together with those concerning other vulnerable groups.

Brussels, 29 May 2008.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Dimitris DIMITRIADIS

⁽²²⁾ Anne-Catherine Guio, 'Material deprivation in the EU', *Statistics in Focus: Population and Social Conditions, Living Conditions and Welfare*, 21/2005, Eurostat, p. 9.

⁽²³⁾ EESC opinion of 18.1.2007 on 'Taking stock of the reality of European society today', § 2.7, 5.3. Rapporteur: Mr Olsson (OJ C 93 of 27.4.2007).