



European Economic and Social Committee
Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship

SOC PRIORITIES FOR THE 2010-2013 TERM

Europe is still marked by high unemployment, although there are some signs of economic recovery. Globalisation, climate change and the ageing workforce also put labour markets under pressure. Proactive strategies, including active labour market policies, must be devised in order to make European working life and labour markets more conducive to productivity, growth and sustainable employment, for the good of all Europeans. Labour markets should have the capacity to integrate, and benefit from, the entire available workforce.

A more holistic view of life cycles is needed that allows for a better synthesis between the various components of living in a modern society, such as education and training, working life and access to services and social benefits. In this context, social dialogue is crucial. Both social partners and other civil society organisations have an important role to play in backing up the notion that well-designed social policies as such and empowerment strategies contribute to Europe's prosperity. EU Member States are facing different problems and have chosen different approaches in dealing with them. In due course, the impact of the new provisions of the Lisbon Treaty, in particular the new horizontal social clause, and the respective roles of the open method of coordination and the Community method should be looked into further.

The three priorities with sub-themes set out below should be seen as closely interrelated. Together they cover the whole range of policy areas of the SOC Section.

MORE EFFICIENT LABOUR MARKETS

1. *A good and productive working life*

To prevent the worsening of the social impact of the economic and financial crisis, it is crucial that employment levels be raised and that special attention be paid to the creation of good-quality jobs, and to the role of entrepreneurship and the potential of small and medium-sized enterprises and the social economy. The aim should be a better balance between flexibility and security in the labour market, with full consideration for the need to anticipate and develop future skills and competences in an approach that supports working-life transitions and meets companies' needs, but also for active inclusion in a less prejudiced labour market. It should be fully recognised that a high-

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quality working life with a high level of involvement of employees, an adequate level of occupational health and safety, a healthy work/life balance and equal opportunities for men and women boost work motivation and productivity and make it possible and more attractive to stay in employment longer. The fight against precarious work and measures to improve the situation of low-skilled workers play a major role in this respect. It should be fully recognised that the seeds of innovation are sown by the way work is organised. Innovation in itself, and in this context also the availability of e-skills in the work force, are important for job creation. The SOC section intends to play an active role in the Commission's Agenda for New Skills and Jobs.

2. *The potential of young people*

Youth unemployment and school drop-out rates are a huge concern in many EU Member States. Given the demographic challenges that lie ahead and the labour shortages in some sectors, it is all-important that young people can realise their potential and play a valid role in the labour market when they have acquired the necessary competences. The transition from school to work for young people in vocational education needs specific attention. The SOC section will closely follow developments in the Commission's Youth on the Move initiative.

3. *Development of the internal market and free movement of labour*

There are still a number of obstacles to free movement of people in the EU, some legal and administrative, some linked to culture and traditions. The question is how these obstacles can be removed in order to advance real geographical mobility. In this context, fundamental social rights must always be respected.

MANAGEMENT OF THE SOCIAL CRISIS

4. *Social security systems and the social impact of the crisis*

The European social model in its different forms is under great pressure because of cuts in public spending. Adequate social safety nets and universal public services must be kept in place to curb the social crisis, and a common European approach must be found, with due respect for conditions and traditions in the different Member States. Poverty, including in-work poverty, is still a major problem in Europe, further aggravated by the crisis. It is important that real long-term progress is achieved in this area. The SOC section will stay involved in the implementation of the European Platform against Poverty, in particular by monitoring progress on achieving the Europe 2020 social targets.

5. ***Giving every child the best start in life***

Children form the basis of tomorrow's society and are at the heart of any well designed family policy. Adult alcoholism, drug abuse and violence all too often have a direct impact on children, with long-lasting personal and societal consequences. There is a need for a balanced and comprehensive policy on addiction-related problems. Education systems and social services for families must be designed so as to contribute to the development of children into functioning adults, with respect for the specificities of each child and taking full account of different family situations. The challenges faced by single parents, and in particular the income of single mothers, need special attention.

6. ***Healthy and active living***

Quality healthcare must be available and accessible to all. At the same time, more focus is needed on healthy lifestyles and prevention policies. The role of sport has been strengthened in the Lisbon Treaty and should be explored. The SOC section intends to play an active role in the European Year for Active Ageing 2012.

EUROPE FOR ALL

7. ***Proactive integration and immigration***

One of the challenges facing the EU is to manage immigration from third countries in a way that benefits both the EU and the immigrants and is fully in accordance with human rights standards. It is crucial that immigrants are prepared for and integrated into the labour market at an early stage, and that cultural differences are not overstated. The SOC Section will continue to look into these and related questions, not least through its standing study group on Integration and Immigration (IMI) and its direct involvement in the European Integration Forum. It will closely follow the implementation of the new five-year Stockholm Programme on Freedom, Security and Justice.

8. ***Enhancing rights and opportunities***

Fundamental rights and non-discrimination are at the heart of the EU. Special attention must be paid to particularly vulnerable minorities and groups such as the Roma and disabled people that are largely excluded from mainstream society and face particular difficulties in improving their situation. A proactive approach to gender equality across all policy areas is necessary. European citizenship should be enhanced and a European area of justice with mutual recognition of juridical decisions should be developed. There is also a need for a coherent EU-level policy on tackling crime.

9. ***Active citizenship and volunteering***

There is a need for greater general awareness of citizens' rights. On the other hand, citizens' own responsibilities in taking an active role in their community, for instance through voluntary work, must not be neglected. The SOC section will be closely involved in the European Year of Volunteering 2011. It also intends to continue organising awareness-raising "going local" events in the Member States.
