One year on: taking stock!

A year ago, when I put myself forward for the position of Vice President, I promised to work towards creating a genuine culture of communication in every part of the EESC. The aim was to help make our work more visible to stakeholders back home and to EU law-makers in Brussels. One year on I admit it is no easy task. My predecessors, Anna Maria Diarmanin, Irini Pani and Jillian Van Turnout, made healthy strides in the right direction, each bringing their own brand of expertise, from youth to video to digital mobile platforms and much more. My job is to build on that. With the support of members through the Communication Group and national Contact points, we are extending our reach back home through the Going Local initiative, and in Brussels through increased contacts with the EP and the Council, and greater ‘visibility’ of plenary sessions, thanks mainly to the work of the Presidency team. The Communication Department and information specialists in the Groups, Sections and others are all stepping up to the mark in challenging circumstances. During my mandate we have already updated the communication strategy, kick-started the action programme, adapted to the fast-moving world of social media and are still producing success stories like Your Europe Your Say, the Open Doors event and the Civil Society Media Seminar. We are also supporting the build up to the European Elections in May and launching Civil Society Prize this spring. Together with the Communication Group, we have also achieved greater harmony in the EESC visual identity and we try as much as possible to accommodate the ever-increasing press and media demands of the challenging political climate in Brussels, Europe and the world.

INTERVIEW: A socially just and cohesive Europe based on our values

The Social Platform is the largest platform of European rights and value-based NGOs working in the social sector. They aim to promote social justice, equality and participatory democracy by voicing the concerns of member organisations. Their work is grounded in a rights based approach encompassing human dignity, gender equality and humanity for all, respect for diversity, solidarity, freedom, social justice, sustainability, transparency and participatory democracy. While the actions of Social Platform focus primarily on the European Union level, they also support the promotion of these values at a global level. Their main vision is to see a society that ensures no one is excluded and where the well-being, the dignity, and the enforcement of human rights of its peoples – and in particular people in vulnerable situations – is the central aim of all policies. Their stated mission is to advocate for, and raise awareness on, policies that bring social progress to all in the European Union, a goal they achieve by mobilizing members and providing them with a strong voice.

EUROPE III  - Social innovation and co-production are approaches which are much discussed at the present time. What do you think are the advantages?

Social innovation and co-production can significantly improve social service delivery and lead to social policy innovation, provided that they are not used only to save public money and are meaningful for the beneficiaries they are intended to address. Indeed, social innovations can contribute to promoting efficiency and effectiveness in social services and policies, but it’s not their raison d’être. It is a way to identify new or improved solutions to already existing, inadequately met or emerging social challenges. However, there are some pre-conditions to be fulfilled: good social innovation comes from well-funded and well operating environments. Innovation also involves failures as well as successes. Social innovation also requires conditions for sustainability – there is no use in having an idea funded if it is not sustainable nor if the correct conditions for scaling up are not available/accessible.

EUROPE III - The recent Convention on the Platform against Poverty continued to highlight the lack of involvement of stakeholders in constructing the National Reform programmes and the difficulty of developing structured dialogue from EU, through national and local level. What are your views on how this situation could be rectified and developed?

The involvement of civil society, let alone people who experience poverty, in the processes of the European Semester is still very disappointing. The purpose of involving all stakeholders, including social NGOs, should be to ensure the best possible design, implementation and evaluation of policies promoting social inclusion and cohesion so as to generate a maximum positive impact and change. This could be achieved already partially at EU level by the Commission, engaging in a more formal consultation example for when preparing the Annual Growth Survey. To support stakeholder engagement at national level, European guidelines should be developed on how to engage with all relevant stakeholders in the elaboration of National Reform Programmes. But also more in general, clear and transparent procedures have to be developed and applied at all levels to allow for structural and meaningful stakeholder involvement in developing, implementing and evaluating policies under the Europe 2020 Strategy. Favourable environments with sustainable funding for social NGOs need to be created to underpin their meaningful involvement.

EUROPE III - Given that the number of people experiencing poverty is increasing how do you think the active inclusion strategy can realistically be achieved?

Active Inclusion is a key tool to fight poverty and social exclusion. The Recommendation on Active Inclusion dates from 2008, but member states are still hardly delivering on its proper implementation. But the increase of poverty in Europe goes beyond the active inclusion strategy. It is an issue about what kind of economic and social policy we want for the next 6 years and longer. It is a question of political choice and priority for the EU and member states. In its communication assessing progress of the Europe 2020 strategy, the Commission clearly says that the poverty target is politically binding. It should not only be binding, but it should be at the centre of all policies to ensure that we have 20 million less people in poverty in 2020 than in 2010. For us, the setback in achieving the poverty target should in no way mean that the EU should disenage from this priority. On the contrary, when looking at the current trends across the member states, the social pillar should be the main priority of the EU in the coming 6 years - having 100 million in poverty in 2020 is not acceptable. . . . . .
EUROPE III - Although it is still early days are you confident that the Social Investment Package will make a strong contribution to achieving progress?

The paradigm change that appears to be embedded in the Social Investment Package is welcomed, it is in line with our view that social policies and services are not a cost but an investment for better cohesion in our societies. However social investment should not be priorised over social protection as both are effective only when combined. The Package can make a real difference and have an impact on social policies if the EU and member states commit to its proper implementation throughout all policies. For example, there needs to be a clear social investment approach in both the National Reform Programmes and the Country Specific Recommendations.

EUROPE III - What are your views on the ability to achieve policy coherence at EU, national and local level throughout?

The EU needs consistent governance, we must ensure the coherence of policies set at European level and indeed a member state level – without this we will never deliver on the inclusive pillar of Europe 2020. With the best will in the world by some parts of the European Commission this year’s Annual Growth Survey really concerns us as we are going to see another cycle where the focus is still firmly on economic growth without increasing social dimension and respect for human rights. Macro-economic objectives will continue to prevent the implementation of social objectives where as they should instead be supporting them. True consistent governance means the preservation and enabling of fundamental rights, member states cannot commit to fundamental rights with their social hand and then withdraw them with their economic hand.

To read more about this organisation, please go to: http://www.socialplatform.org/who-we-are/#sthash.cAvuPcBk.dpuf

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haile_Selassie

Solomon, Queen Sheba and the Jewish emperor of Ethiopia

Last Emperor of Ethiopia with lineage tracing back to King Solomon, Queen Sheba and the Jewish emperor of Ethiopia


Mr. Antonio LUPULO (IT) is the rapporteur for the opinion on: “Internet Policy and Governance – Europe’s role in shaping the future of Internet Governance” – TEN/549.

Mr. Arnold METZLER (DE) is the Rapporteur for the own-initiative opinion on: “Situation and surrounding conditions of civil society organisations in Turkey” – REX/397.

The full listing of membership of the study groups for the new work may be consulted here:

http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?c=portal_en.group-3-new-study-groups

The Group Secretariat is happy to welcome our new trainee, Massimiliano LOLLIS, who is originally from Verona (Italy). Max studied in Verona and Venice (Italy), also spending three months in Valencia (Spain, 2012) working as a trainee in a trading company within the framework of the European Programme Erasmus Placement. In February 2013 he graduated in International Relations from the Ca’ Foscari University of Venice. His dissertation focused on Port Cooperation issues in the Upper Adriatic area, but his cultural interests also range from foreign politics to European studies, to literature and radio. Indeed, since 2007 he worked as a radio speaker (volunteer) at the Web-Radio of the University of Verona (Fuori Aula Network), where he had the opportunity to learn so much about radio and journalism, also supported by a team of young colleagues and friends. Currently, he is with us for five months. He tells us that “such a working environment is actually dynamic and culturally stimulating, representing for each stagiaire a unique opportunity to improve social, linguistic and professional skills. Of course, for many young people this is also the chance to see how European Institutions really work, getting to know a reality often twisted by the media” Max will work on various projects, including assisting with the planning and organisation of the Group III extraordinary meeting in Milano (Italy) on 23-24 October 2014.

The Farmers’ Category met on Wednesday 5 March 2014. Amongst other agenda items were a presentation by Richard Ramon I Sumoy from the E.U. Unit for Agricultural Policy, Analysis and Perspectives of DG Agriculture and Rural Development, on the theme of “The implementation of the CAP reform”, followed by a debate with the members of the Category. Then, Group III member Lutz Ribbe (DE), President of the Sustainable Development Observatory, took part in an exchange of views on possible future co-operation. Members also went on to discuss the organisation of the joint meeting of the Farmers and the Consumers and Environment Categories, which is planned for 26 June 2014.

The Social Economy Category held a meeting for Friday 14 March 2014 to discuss possible follow-up to the Strasbourg conference on Social Entrepreneurship which took place in January of this year. A presentation of the World Cooperative Monitor 2013 was given, in addition to an exchange of views with a representative of the Entrepreneurship and Social Economy Unit of DG Enterprise. The meeting on 14 March also provided the opportunity to update members on recent developments in the Cooperative Sector and on the draft ESEC Opinion on the future of a European Mutual Society.

The SMEs, Crafts and Liberal Professions Category will hold a meeting on 1st of April 2014, in the morning. The speaker, Panagiotis Gkofas, will present the latest developments and give an overview of his activities over the past months. Members will also have an opportunity to conduct a thematic debate on the “Crowdfunding in the EU – Exploring the added value of potential EU action” with the interventions of representatives of the European Commission DG MARKT, Maria Teresa Fabregas Fernandez, as well as of the BUSINESSEUROPE SME Department, Daniel Cloquet and of the President of European Crowdfunding Network, Oliver Gajda. The spokesperson of the “Consumers and Environment” category, Reine-Claude Mader, will also intervene to provide the point of view of consumers on the topic. A presentation by Deborah Dawson from Design Business Association, specialist in design and investment is also foreseen to be followed by a debate.

More information on the work of the categories can be found on our website, by contacting the spokespersons of the categories, or the Secretariat of Group III at: gr3@eesc.europa.eu.
Housing construction and housing provision. A computer-based tool helps older people to express their needs and make independent choices with regard to housing. Research circles are organized at local level to involve users and other relevant stakeholder in the development of the innovation. It is tested in 4 different countries (Italy, Sweden, Latvia and Germany) and it is backed up by an analysis of the University of Lund (you can read the presentation - http://www.socialcapitalform.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/AGE_INNOVAGE_project-social-innovation.pdf). Florian Pomper from Caritas Austria highlighted how important it is to have funding available to support the early stage of social innovation, namely the process of identifying new needs and the development of innovative solutions. Most of the Civil Society Organizations cannot afford to build up additional human resources for the development of innovative solutions. As a result, the job of developing new concepts has to be done by the existing employees as an additional task on top of their operative day to day work. Just imagine for example that a big company like Apple would announce that they close down their product development unit and that the job of developing the future products would form now be done by the shop assistants in their apple stores... unthinkable in the business world, but much too often reality in the social sector.

Representatives from the Commission, the European Economic and Social Committee, and MEPs were asked to comment Social Platform’s policy recommendations. Jutta Steineck MEP, rapporteur on the EU Programme for Employment and Social Innovation, commented that the adopted EAS programme is accessible for civil society organisations in all its areas: especially with regard to the Progress axis, every project, irrespective of its size, should be eligible. It is very important that failure is not a reason to withdraw finance, as risk of failure is the essence of social policy experimentation. Financial support should be granted not only to experimented and proven projects, but also to evaluation and transferability, otherwise the small projects would not have any added value. The evaluations should not be solely based on quantitative criteria, but also on qualitative. For instance in the employment field, it is not only important to evaluate the quality of persons that got an employment contract, but also the sustainability and quality of this job. To learn more, you can watch the video (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3QQ_I_)

Raymond Maes, Member of Commissioner Andor’s Cabinet, highlighted that social innovation is not a goal in itself, but it is a mean to feed innovative processes in the employment and social inclusion agenda. For instance, the Youth Guarantee is an example to try to innovate the existing structures in member states to tackle youth unemployment. For the Commission, there is a tension between keeping the bottom up approach in social innovation and ensuring its transferability at EU level. Amaryllis Vervoegen from DG Market stressed the links between the social innovation agenda and the Social Business Initiative (SBI). Facilitating access for social enterprises to private money is one of the main headlines of the SBI if you want to be innovative, you need to take the risk, because you don’t know where you are going. This is why social enterprises need private finance. In the frame of the Group of Experts on social entrepreneurship a report has been drafted on measuring the social impact of social enterprises. The report looks quite vast, it has to be flexible regarding the methods and tools, it is not about being prescriptive.

Ariane Rodert, Vice-President of Group II of the ESC, stressed the need to link more closely social innovation with the social business agenda. We need to look at new ways of co-production and co-creation of policies. There is not always a market logic to capture social innovation from civil society. You do not always have indicators to measure. We have to be sensitive on what and how we measure. The problem arises when this logic goes at member state level. The "payment by results" logic (according to which public authorities pay for services only when they are successful) brings the logic of a private market which is not always aligned with the social innovation agenda. Facilitating access for social enterprises to private money is one of the main headlines of the SBI if you want to be innovative, you need to take the risk, because you don’t know where you are going. This is why social enterprises need private finance. In the frame of the Group of Experts on social entrepreneurship a report has been drafted on measuring the social impact of social enterprises. The report looks quite vast, it has to be flexible regarding the methods and tools, it is not about being prescriptive.

On February 13, 2014 we held a lunch debate on social innovation at the European Parliament. It was hosted by Heinz Becker MEP, rapporteur on the Social Business Initiative. Our President Heather Roy stated that social innovation is a radical break with conventional services for homeless people (novelty) and promotes the right to housing and dignity. It is currently being scaled up or adapted to a wide variety of national, regional and local contexts and it is increasingly influential at all levels of policy making on homelessness. It is currently being scaled up or adapted to a wide variety of national, regional and local contexts and it is increasingly influential at all levels of policy making on homelessness. It is currently being scaled up or adapted to a wide variety of national, regional and local contexts and it is increasingly influential at all levels of policy making on homelessness. It is currently being scaled up or adapted to a wide variety of national, regional and local contexts and it is increasingly influential at all levels of policy making on homelessness.

For instance, on that occasion, I had the honour of being invited as a moderator in a workshop on “Organisation models to strengthen family farms”. A dialogue towards more sustainable and resilient farming in Europe and the world will draw attention to the important role of family farming. On that occasion, I had the honour of being invited as a moderator in a workshop on “Organisation models to strengthen family farms”. A dialogue towards more sustainable and resilient farming in Europe and the world will draw attention to the important role of family farming. On that occasion, I had the honour of being invited as a moderator in a workshop on “Organisation models to strengthen family farms”. A dialogue towards more sustainable and resilient farming in Europe and the world will draw attention to the important role of family farming.

At the EESC, we have therefore decided to mark the IFY with an own-initiative opinion on land grabbing in the EU and its repercussions on family farming – for which the rapporteur will be Mr Kaul Nurm. In particular, the opinion is to highlight the role of family farming to counter large-scale land acquisitions, identifying the key factors for a successful development of family farming and for reducing the abandonment of land especially by young people. I believe that the opinion will represent a good opportunity to contribute to the debate during the IFY by putting forward relevant civil society proposals to address land grabbing and to foster public policies that support family farming. We need to call for the right conditions ensuring the viability of family farms in the future. More information can be found at this website of the Food and Agriculture Organisation: http://www.fao.org/family-farming-2014/en/
Richard ADAMS (UK) – NAT/652 “Technological implementation of the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change” (EESC opinion 776/2013)

Under Kyoto the EU-15 were committed to reducing their collective emissions to 8% below 1990 levels by the years 2008-2012 and this is likely to have been over-achieved. For 2020, the EU has agreed to commit to reducing overall greenhouse gas emissions from its 28 Member States by 20% compared to 1990 levels. The implementation of the Kyoto Protocol after 2012 requires new measures and a reimplementation of the rules to be drawn up for the European Union, its Member States and Iceland. The recent Monitoring Mechanism Regulation does not make it clear whether the Commission will have to adopt delegated acts relating to the implementation of rules on the second engagement period. Accordingly, it is necessary to amend this Regulation and legal basis to allow the Commission to decide on ‘delegated acts’. The proposal facilitates and enables the technical implementation of existing agreements. The Committee supports the proposal as presented.

Viljam PÄALEN (SK) – ECD/158 “Common system of value added tax as regards a standard VAT return” (EESC opinion 6872/2013)

The Committee is of the opinion that, if properly implemented, could cut red tape for companies in the EU and thereby better capitalise on the potential of the single market, as well as improving the efficacy of tax collection and the fight against tax fraud. At the same time, the Committee calls on the Commission not to let up in its efforts when it comes to its implementation. However, the Committee is indeed concerned about the attempt to use the comitologylex to also establish the principles for making corrections to the return. It therefore recommends that the whole proposal be considered in its entirety in the first reading of the directive. Moreover, it endorses the “once only” principle, which would ensure that businesses supply certain information only once. The information should be collected in such a way that national authorities can use them for both inspection (preventing tax evasion and fraud) and the calculations of the value added tax. Such a proposal is due only after the invoice has been paid by the purchaser – which would avoid a situation in which honest businesses are in effect lending to the state – and also avoids the possibility of excess VAT deductions. In conclusion, the Committee thinks it absolutely essential that the Commission also embark upon effective standardisation of timeframes and deadlines for the whole spectrum of VAT-related payments and corrections to tax returns.


The Committee is concerned about the uncertainties identified in the AGS, such as the continued existence of high unemployment levels. These uncertainties undermine prospects and stand in the way of growth. It acknowledges that the existence of social and economic disparities makes it difficult to set uniform priorities valid throughout the European Union. In order to draw up an annual growth survey, the Committee recommends specific measures to ensure dialogue between the Commission and civil society, and to strengthen social dialogue. The Committee also calls for the involvement of civil society. In order to ensure economic recovery based on a more sustainable model of development. The EU must show ordinary Europeans that it has the political will and detailed vision to bring about deeper integration in order to achieve a “Better Europe”, i.e. “more Europe” in certain policy areas.

Pedro NARRO (ES) – RES/378 “EU-Morocco Trade Relations” (EESC opinion 3614/2013)

In this own-initiative opinion, the EESC supports deeper trade relations between the EU and Morocco, which are of great societal importance. The Committee appreciates the efforts of the European Parliament and the Council in the development and implementation of the trade agreements and advocates the effective and broad inclusion of national stakeholders in the implementation. The EU-Morocco Union and its potential to invest in all levels of training and in gender equality measures. They should give priority to the specific needs of young people, who are the country’s most disadvantaged groups. Morocco relies on agriculture as one of the main drivers of its economy. New opportunities for Moroccan farming in the EU should not result in the country’s external dependence for basic raw materials, biodiversity loss and the disappearance of age-old family farms. In conclusion, the EESC advocates setting up a joint EU-Morocco consultative committee comprising the EESC, Social and Environmental Council and the EESC in the framework of negotiations for a DCFTA, to enable organised civil society to participate in the process.

Pedro NARRO (ES) – NAT/596 “Integrated production in the European Union” (EESC opinion 2103/2013)

For an in-depth analysis of this issue, please see our January edition (page III), where the main issues involved were elaborated: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/january-2014.pdf

Jorge PEGALO LIJT (PT) – NAT/722 “Jurisdiction and the recognition and enforcement of judgments in civil and commercial matters” (EESC opinion 7000/2013)

The EESC supports the initiative of the EP and the Council, which is essential for legal certainty and security in relation to personal financial matters. The EESC is in line with the Council’s wish to avoid the need for a new international convention with a subsequent ratification in each member state. It should be envisaged that the jurisdiction and the recognition and enforcement of judgments in civil and commercial matters might be covered by a regulation. The EESC welcomes the proposal made by the European Commission to set up an expert group to examine this question in detail. The EESC considers that such a regulation should be included in the Council’s work plan on the improvement of civil and commercial law. Such a regulation should also include provisions on the recognition and enforcement of judgments in relation to family matters and interesting points relating to property of the European Union and its citizens.

Indra VAREKYTE (LT) – SOC/499 “Quality Framework for Traineeships” (EESC opinion 8054/2013)

Traineeships have become an important gateway through which young people enter the labour market. To facilitate access to employment, traineeships should offer good quality and adequate working conditions, and should not be a substitute for regular jobs or a pre-condition for a job placement. In this opinion, the EESC gives priority to the implementation of the framework, which is closely linked to active policy measures, and is pleased to note that the framework has been adopted. Furthermore, the EESC warmly welcomes the proposal for a quality framework for traineeships.

Panel on “Sustainable growth, competitiveness and development” heard from another prominent member of the Greek Government. Ms Olga Kefalogianni, Minister for Tourism of the Hellenic Republic. Our four members from Greece played a key role in the event by chairing and moderating the various panels. Around 200 representatives of organised civil society from across Greece attended the event. A special comprehensive report, which will include the final conclusions, will be published in our April edition.

More about the event can be consulted here: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/tr,portals/5/events-and-activities-greece-growth-recovery

The EESC is not responsible for the content of external websites.