Ireland: What next?

What have been the opportunities for Ireland from membership to the EU? How can Europe overcome the challenges of the economic and financial crisis and ensure a ‘smart, inclusive and sustainable growth’? What should be the future of the Common Agricultural Policy and could ‘more Europe’ result in a better Europe? These were some of the issues we discussed in Dublin on 1 February, during the conference organised by the Various Interests Group of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), in partnership with the European Movement Ireland.

Bringing together approximately 150 participants from the EESC and Irish civil society, the event sought to review and assess Ireland’s journey through 40 years of EU membership. It was also the opportunity to address some crucial topics on the future of the EU and the participants were flown by the presence of the Irish Minister Joan Burton TD, responsible for Social Protection, Senator Jillian van Turnhout, Member of the Irish Senate, Sjafot Nilsson, President of the EESC and Mairead McGuinness, MEP.

Without doubt, our event came at a very timely moment, with Europe’s economic, political and social crisis reaching its fifth consecutive year and in view of recent announcements by a key Member State on its future relationship with the EU. For the reality is that Europe is at a crossroads and it has to carry out a very fine balancing act. On the one hand, there is a fervent attempt to make Europe and its political legitimacy and democratic accountability.

For this reason, I personally very much welcome the commitment of the Irish Presidency of the Council of the EU, for it to be ‘a recovery country driving recovery in Europe’. For we need to find holistic solutions to Europe’s economic and financial crisis. The fiscal, banking and financial unions are necessary pillars of Economic and Monetary Union. But they must be complemented by growth and job creation, equitable and efficient use of resources, territorial and social cohesion. And all of the above should be underpinned by political legitimacy and democratic accountability.

If there is one area where we must rapidly find solutions, it is in employment creation, notably for youth and poverty reduction. And this must be done by supporting and strengthening the Single Market and the Europe 2020 Strategy, industrial policy, research, development and international trade. And the key actors in this process should be European SMEs, the social economy, the green economy, the liberal professions, etc. We must also invest and not regress in qualitative education, lifelong learning and enhanced mobility for Europeans. And above all, we need the right mix of consolidation and growth, in order to help our youth, Europe’s future.

The first place to commit to this is of course in the EU budget, through the Multi-Annual Financial Framework. Hence, it is imperative that we have a new budget centred on growth, employment and competitiveness. It is crucial that we rapidly progress towards genuine economic and monetary union (EMU) and that we begin to invest in the social dimension of EMU.

I sincerely believe that the EESC can make a significant contribution to this debate and I hope that we will rise up to the challenge made to us by Mr Van Rompuy, President of the European Council, during his participation at the EESC plenary last month.

For the cost of ‘non-Europe’ is so high that it is politically inconceivable. Put otherwise, we must have the power of imagination and the strength of determination to promote ‘more Europe’ for a better Europe. For this reason, it is my firm belief that we need an upward movement of responsibility of policies to the EU level, a sort of pooling of responsibility, which would lead to significant increases in growth, competitiveness, job creation and poverty reduction. This could take place in several policy areas such as energy, research, taxation, social policy, customs and border security, etc. For particularly in times of crisis, we need to take concrete steps towards significant reducing the enormous waste resulting from separate national budgets.

Efficiency in policy-making should also be extended to the reformed CAP for investing in a sustainable and effective CAP is without doubt in Europe’s interest. After 50 years, CAP remains at the cornerstone of European integration and it continues to play a central role in European food security, growth, job creation and in the vitality of rural communities. For these reasons, at our conference, it was recommended that the future EU budget for CAP is maintained at the current level, that it should support ‘greening’, sustainable forms of agriculture and farmers who actually work and produce. This is necessary in order to address future food demand for food and increasing food prices, whilst also attracting younger generations to the vocation of farming.

Finally, I would like to recall that in 2013 Ireland is celebrating The Gathering, a call to the 70 million Irish Diaspora worldwide to rejoice in being Irish and to come together in events throughout the year. Perhaps we could make a parallel at the European level? Perhaps we could argue that Europe’s economic, political and social crises have led to a Gathering of the EU and of its Member States who in the last few years have realised the benefits, opportunities and challenges of EU membership! They have realised that it is a future worth fighting for!
CONCLUSION

Membership of the European Union has resulted in enormous benefits for European citizens and individual Member States, including Ireland, in the economic, social and cultural spheres. Whilst recognising the hardships of five years of austerity, the continuing crisis can be utilised as an opportunity to invest in Europe’s future. It is an opportunity for increased economic, financial and political integration, which will lead to a more sustainable, competitive and cohesive Europe. Against this background and based on both the work of the EESC to date and on the discussions at the above-mentioned conference, the following are recommended:

INVESTING IN A SUSTAINABLE AND EFFECTIVE COMMON AGRICULTURAL POLICY (CAP)

- Call on the European Council to include in the social dimension of EMU, concrete proposals for inter-generational solidarity, poverty reduction, youth unemployment and gender equality. Particular emphasis should be placed on investments in active inclusion, education systems, lifelong learning and youth mobility programmes;
- Stress that despite fiscal discipline, the EU and national budgets should focus on incentives for growth, employment, competitiveness, sustainable development and consumption, with the EU budget supported by own-resource mechanisms;
- Highlight the pivotal role in job creation, innovation and in growth to be played by the Single Market, the Europe 2020 Strategy and a new industrial policy for Europe. Europe’s SMEs, the social economy, the green economy and the liberal professions should be key actors in this process;
- Urgently call for additional measures to enhance the protection of consumer rights, which will result in greater trust by citizens in the Single Market;
- Insist on the importance of ending the negative link between bank bailouts and sovereign debt of Member States, by inter alia, the use of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). Even a partial covering of bank debt by the ESM would enable bailout countries to regain growth and exit austerity more rapidly;
- Within this context, strongly regret that in the case of Ireland, the direct recapitalisation of banks through the ESM is currently not possible;
- Call for the European Investment Fund (EIF) to be re-capitalised, in order to enable it to provide development capital for European SMEs, notably when banks are either unwilling or incapable of meeting the needs of SMEs;
- Welcome the future re-capitalisation of the European Investment Bank (EIB), which is scheduled for March 2013. This should enable the EIB to significantly expand its support for long term infrastructure investments;
- Highlight that most analyses of the crisis have blamed bankers, speculators, credit rating agencies and the financial markets. Few have singled out political incompetence, which is also a contributory factor to the current crisis.

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF EUROPE’S FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC CRISIS

- Insist that if Europe is to fully meet its ambitions and potential, it is necessary to invest in a united Europe which is mutually reinforcing and stronger than the sum of its individual parts;
- A key first step in this process is the completion of a ‘genuine economic and monetary union’ and the Irish Presidency of the Council of the EU is urged to facilitate the future implementation of economic governance in the EU, notably the ECB-based banking supervision and the recapitalisation of banks through the European Stability Mechanism;
- Urge rapid progress towards a fiscal and economic union and stronger investment in the social dimension of Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), as clearly stipulated in the conclusions of the European Summit of December 2012;
- Recall that European civil society and citizens have a pivotal role to play in finding solutions at the European level, which would complement national strategies. To this end, civil society and citizens should be more actively involved in the formulation and implementation of European policies, via, inter alia, Article 11 of the Lisbon Treaty (TFEU);
- Highlight that an adequate EU budget for the next Multi-annual Financial Framework and an upward subsidiarity of responsibility towards policy-making at the European level would result in significant increases in growth, competitiveness, job creation and poverty reduction. For example, in the areas of energy, research, customs and border security, taxation, social policy etc;
- Within this context, strongly urge the European Commission to assess the cost of ‘non-Europe’ in all policy areas and to evaluate its impact on employment and growth. As a second step, the Europe 2020 Strategy should include new objectives and action plans for reducing these costs.

Dublin, 1 February 2013

To watch a short overview video of the conference, please go to: http://www.europeanmovement.ie/ireland-40-years-on-the-benefits-opportunities-and-challenges-of-eu-membership/

On 17 December the Bureau of the Various Interests Group held an extraordinary meeting in Brussels. Three of the main agenda items were a discussion concerning the future prospects for the categories, a presentation of Review of Activities in 2012 and the draft Work Programme the Group in for 2013.

The Report of Activities in 2012 and the draft Work Programme and schedule of planned meetings for 2013 may be consulted here: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.group-3
In mid-December, at the initiative of the Federation of Social Services (FDSS), a symposium on the future of food aid in Europe was held at the EESC. The FDSS helps to coordinate the activities of its members and provide them with continuous training so that they can make an ongoing contribution to the work of reflection and research conducted in the field of social action and draft questions and recommendations for policymakers.

The debate was well-timed since the European authorities have been working for the past few months on revamping the European aid programme for the most deprived persons (MDP). Following the decision of the European Court of Justice in 2011, a drastic reduction in the budget for the MDP and a broadening of its objectives are planned for 2014-2020. It should be noted that this system was introduced in Europe in the 1980s and has been funded up until now by the agricultural budget. Originally, the redistributed food came from intervention stocks.

There was a thorough exchange of views between the participants, who included a representative of the European Parliament and many people active in combating poverty and social exclusion.

Two workshops set up alongside the symposium enabled participants to explore and better understand what is happening in the various European countries in the field of food aid.

Among the conclusions from this seminar, the following should be noted:

- the great concern of local actors over the budget which, under the current proposals, would be increased to EUR 2.5 billion for 2014-2020, although needs are estimated at EUR 4.75 billion;
- the 15% co-funding requirement which would be imposed on the Member States could discourage them from getting involved in the programme;
- extending the objectives from food aid alone to other areas that promoted the social inclusion of disadvantaged populations may be difficult due to the cuts in resources;
- the favourable reaction to the greater flexibility allowed to Member States when implementing the new programme.

The "Social Economy Category" will meet on 22 February 2013. The first item on the agenda is the election of the spokesperson to lead the category in the second half-mandate 2013-2015. This will be followed by a brainstorming session on the Category’s Work Programme for 2013-2014. Then the members are due to have a chance to exchange views on "Social Impact Measurement" with Ulrich Grabenwarter, Head of Strategic Development, European Investment Fund, Jose Luis Monzon, President, CRIEC, Spain, University of Valencia and Carmen Marcuello, CRIEC, Spain, University of Zaragoza. Finally, round up the morning, there will be a presentation of the "Atlas of Social Economy" in Romania, by Ancuta Vamesu of the Institute of Social Economy.

To consult the full agenda, please visit our website: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?l=portal.en.social-economy-category-documents.26045

The "Consumers and Environment Category" have planned their first meeting of this year on 28 February 2013. The first item on the agenda is the election of the spokesperson to lead the category in the second half-mandate 2013-2015. Then, three Group III members will make presentations on a series of important issues for the category. Firstly, Richard Adams, Rapporteur for the ongoing opinion TEN/503 "Exploring the needs and methods of public involvement and engagement in the energy policy field" will brief the members on the progress of his opinion and then report back on his participation in the Forum of the Citizens’ Energy. Then, Dick Westendorp will speak about the DG Enterprise and Industry D.2 Head of Unit, Business cooperation and business support, with present the Enterprise Europe Network and Group III member Thomas Palmgren will open a debate on the possible input of the category to the Extraordinary meeting of Group III being held on 6 June 2013 on "Fair access to credit and to saving plans". Further debates foreseen for the afternoon session will include: "The SME dialogue and SME intergroup focus in 2013", with the participation of Othmar Karas, Vice-president of the European Parliament and President of the SME Intergroup. Then Sebastiano Toffaletti, Director of NORMAPME will speak about "New opportunities for SMEs opened by the European standardisation regulation" and Christos Kyriatzis, European Commission, DG Enterprise and Industry A.2, Deputy Head of the Unit International affairs and Missions for Growth will address the topic of "Small Business Big World". To conclude the day, a discussion on "After market Automotive: the impact of the economic crisis and of the protection of competition principles of the SMEs of the sector" will take place. Debates with the category members will be held following each of the above presentations.

To consult the full agenda for this category meeting, please visit our website at: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?l=portal.en.consumers-and-environment-category-documents.26046

The "SMEs, Crafts and Professions Category" will hold an all-day meeting on 5 March 2013. The first item on the agenda is the election of the spokesperson to lead the category in the second half-mandate 2013-2015. This will be followed by presentations of the "Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan" by Luc Hendrickx, UAPME, Director Competitiveness of Enterprises, External Relations, Legal Affairs and Ben Butters, EUROCHAMBRES, Director EU Affairs. To round off the morning, Peter Wagg, European Commission, DG Enterprise and Industry D.2 will make a presentation on "The impact of the crisis, poverty and consumption". Finally, the members will discuss the draft work programme for 2013, and various events planned during the year.

To consult the full agenda for this category meeting, please visit our website: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?l=portal.en.consumers-and-environment-category-documents.26046

The "Societal Changes Impacting the Lives of Families" working group of COFACE (The Confederation of Family Organisations in the EU) held its meeting in the premises of the EESC. In accordance with the programme, I took the floor at the beginning of the meeting and welcomed the participants in the name of the EESC Group III. After welcoming the participants I introduced the main points of our last opinion on family policy (SOC/199 "Family policy and demographic change"), including the recommendation to dedicate the year 2014 to the European Year of Families. I also spoke about the dedication of the EESC Group III to support COFACE in their campaign to dedicate the year 2014 to the topic "reconciling work and family life". COFACE Director Agnes Uhereczky, referring to the success of the hearing organised in 2011 linked to SOC/199 opinion, has expressed an interest in organising a joint event with Group III in 2013.
Group III members co-ordinating the work on new opinions

Mr Jorge PEÇAGOS LIS (PT) is the Rapporteur for the opinion on: “Protecting businesses against misleading marketing practices and ensuring effective enforcement” – INT/675.

Reine-Claude MADER (FR) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Programme to support specific activities in the field of health: monitoring and reporting for the period of 2014-2020” – INT/676.

Bernardo HERNÁNDEZ BATALLER (ES) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “State of the Customs Union” – INT/677.


Rony LAINNOE (BE) is the Co-rapporteur for the opinion on: “Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan: Reigniting the entrepreneurial spirit” – INT/679.

Richard BALFE (UK) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Approximation of the laws, regulations and administrative provisions of the Member States concerning the manufacture, presentation and sale of tobacco products” – SOC/478.

Mr SÉANUS BOLAND (IE) is the President of the study group for the opinion for the exploratory opinion on: “Establishing Sustainable Development Goals - European civil society’s contribution to the EU position” – NAT/594.

Carlos PEREIRA MARTINS (PT) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “Occurrence reporting in civil aviation” – TEN/510.

Evangelia KEKELELI (EL) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “State of the Customs Union: A Final Agenda for Europe: Driving European growth digitally” – TEN/512.

Ioniq SIBIBI (RO) is the Rapporteur for the exploratory opinion on: “The role of civil society in EU-Serbia relations” – REX/381.

The full listing of membership of the study groups for the new works may be consulted here: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/n/porta l/group-3-new-study-groups

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Overview of Our Members’ Work in the EESC

At its plenary session on 16-17 January 2013 the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted the following opinions for which Group III members were Rapporteurs or Co- Rapporteurs.


Against the background of an on-going economic crisis and, amongst other things, the impact the development of financial markets has had on the national budgets of the Member States, on the real economy, on poverty and on employment in the EU, the optimistic tone the Commission strikes in its Communication regarding the implementation of the Single Market (SM) feels inappropriate. The EESC believes that the Commission has paid too little attention to the unintended negative side-effects of the Single Market. An overly explicit and demonstrative, but premature, claim of success can only frustrate the EU citizens. The consequence could be a further undermining of the Single Market rather than a new dynamic. The Commission should demonstrate a more realistic approach by communicating in a well-balanced tone. The better functioning of the Single Market by means of the old and new guidelines is under huge threat from the massive increase to 28 million unemployed, particularly affected in the EU. Hundreds of thousands of SME’s have gone bankrupt and 1.2 million citizens are at threat of poverty and social exclusion, i.e. approx. 25% of the EU population. For these reasons, demand and consumption in the EU are massively affected. In addition to key actions EU and the Member States must step up their efforts to overcome the financial, economic and structural challenges EU and the Member States have to face in order to reach the full potential of the Single Market. The EESC calls on the Parliament, Commission and Council to act quickly without affecting quality, in order to ensure that these legislative proposals are adopted before the end of the Parliament and Commission mandates in spring 2014. The EESC would very much welcome the fast application of the measures proposed in the Communication by the Governance of the Single Market to improve the overall implementation of EU rules.

Gerd WOLF (DE) – INT/664 “Enhancing and focusing EU international cooperation in research and innovation: A strategic approach” (EESC opinion 2011/2012).

The Committee welcomes the Commission’s new communication and, for the most part, supports its goals and overall approach, which aims to: 1) make sure that the Horizon 2020 budget is financed at the very least on the scale proposed by the Commission, and reiterates the request it has made to the European Parliament and the Council that they should not allow any cuts in this area. The Committee argues that those Member States in the European Research Area which at present do not have enough research institutions of excellence should eliminate this disadvantage as quickly as possible with the help of the Structural and Cohesion Funds and should facilitate the development of a sufficient number of outstanding researchers and innovative entrepreneurs. However, the EESC is concerned that international cooperation could develop into a political end in itself for the Commission or a vehicle for Commission external policy. Cooperation is not an end in itself and requires further effort, which is justified exclusively by the increase and multiplication of knowledge and skills as well as the fruits of innovation. For this reason, such cooperation projects should only involve parties which can contribute added value. Moreover, the Committee is also concerned by the words underlined in the proposal put forward by Horst Reinerd (for HORIZON 2020). The EESC recommends that those Member States which have embarked on the process of microelectronics to cooperate more extensively with the countries of the United States in order to facilitate mutual access to the market. Moreover, the EESC recommends more specifically that the Member States in the European Research Area which have just adopted a new microelectronics strategy should consider the possibility of setting up a single market, which would facilitate intra-EU exchange of goods and services.

Ariane RODERT (SE) – SOC/468 “Establishing a European Social Mark” (EESC opinion 1820/2012).

This exploratory opinion was requested by the European Parliament. In the EESC’s view, efforts to strengthen the social dimension and social values in Europe are very important, but finds that it is necessary, as a first step, to further clarify the added value, timing and focus of this proposal in relation to its policy goals, which would be more effectively achieved by means of tougher and better-implemented social legislation, as well as a reinforced open method of co-ordination. Besides, open method of co-ordination reference to the EU social dimension should therefore be systematically incorporated into the National Reform Plans (NRP) and the European semester. Amongst a number of key observations, the EESC notes that the gender dimension in the EESC opinion, the EESC deems it important that the country-specific recommendations calling on the Member States to adjust their NRP to take into account the principle of gender equality are put into practice and followed through, which will require a consistent use of Community Funds, especially the European Social Fund. Furthermore, it recommends that next month’s European Semester Framework (2014-2020) makes available adequate and specific funding to advance women’s rights and gender equality. The EESC considers that women’s potential in terms of quantity and quality should be supported in the different areas addressed by the European Strategy for Gender Equality and the EESC welcomes the principle that the 2020 Strategy and the NRP to take into account the principle of gender equality are put into practice and followed through, which will require a consistent use of Community Funds, especially the European Social Fund. Furthermore, it recommends that next month’s European Semester Framework (2014-2020) makes available adequate and specific funding to advance women’s rights and gender equality. The EESC considers that women’s potential in terms of quantity and quality should be supported in the different areas addressed by the European Strategy for Gender Equality.


In this own-initiative opinion, the EESC endorses and welcomes the principle that the 2020 Strategy and the NRP should be mutually reinforcing and deems it essential to overcome the fact that the gender dimension is not specifically addressed in any of the EU 2020 strategy’s seven flagship initiatives. The EESC believes that the gender dimension should therefore be systematically incorporated into the National Reform Plans (NRP) and the European semester. Amongst a number of key observations, the EESC notes that the gender dimension should be a priority. In addition to key actions the EU and the Member States should eliminate this disadvantage as quickly as possible with the help of the Structural and Cohesion Funds and should facilitate the development of a sufficient number of outstanding researchers and their organisations, which need to be fully accounted for in budget planning and appropriations.

Nelson Mandela (1918-)

“No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can learn to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”

South African anti-apartheid activist and politician

President of South Africa from 1994 to 1999


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Quote of the month…

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