Not for profit services should be exempt from competition rules, says EESC

Services of general interest play a vital role in the daily lives of citizens and are one of the values underlying the European social model. However, if the process of political and economic integration within the European Union is to move forward, a series of measures is needed. This is the principal finding of an exploratory opinion (entitled Services of general interest), adopted by a large majority by the EESC on 17 July (rapporteur: Mr Hernández Bataller, Various Interests, Spain).

The Committee believes there is a need for the Commission to present a proposal for a framework Directive consolidating the political principles governing services of general economic interest and giving Member States the flexibility they need in this area. The proposal for a Directive should consider the reasons for setting up a service of general interest, which can be both economic and social. Moreover, the European ESC believes that services associated with national education systems and the mandatory membership of a basic social security scheme, and services provided by not-for-profit social, charitable and cultural entities, must be exempt from competition rules and provisions relating to the internal market. The Committee believes that a specific focus needs to be given to the provision and financing of public broadcasting services in order to safeguard the protection of fundamental rights, democratic principles and pluralism, which may be affected by certain processes of concentration.

Need for EU directive to eradicate discrimination against disabled people

During its July plenary session the Committee adopted an own-initiative opinion on the Integration of disabled people into society. The rapporteur was Mr Cabra de Luna, a Spanish member of the EESC’s Various Interests Group. No votes were cast against this opinion.

There are 37 million disabled people in the European Union and that there will be about 50 million disabled people in the EU once the accession countries have joined. To contribute to the elimination of current barriers - and the prevention of new ones - an EU directive based on Article 13 should be drawn up to make it unlawful to discriminate against disabled people in all spheres of life, including education and access to goods and services which are available to the public, including housing.

In order to increase the employment levels of disabled people, EU Member States should ensure the swift and adequate implementation of the EU directive on equal treatment in the workplace; the European Commission should propose to strengthen current guideline 7 in the Employment Guidelines that refers to disabled people; the social partners at EU level should consider to make use of the EU social dialogue mechanisms to propose new initiatives for the employment of disabled people; the EU directives on public procurement should be modified to allow for public authorities to include the employment of disabled people as an award criteria; national and EU networks of employers and trade unions involved in the employment of disabled people could be established and, finally, the EU Labour Force Survey should permanently include information on the situation of disabled people in the labour market.

Suggestions for the EU’s economic and social cohesion strategy... and the future of cohesion policy after enlargement

A Permanent European Child-Friendly Forum to be launched with the backing of the EESC

A hearing on children and youth policies in Europe, entitled “Children First”, was held on 25 June at the European Economic and Social Committee. The event was supported by a wide range of organizations dealing with children and youth policies.

The hearing concluded with support from all organizations present for the establishment of a Permanent European Child-Friendly Forum. This would be held at the headquarters of the EESC on an annual basis, with the personal backing of the Committee president, Mr Göke Frerichs. It was an initiative which would help key players pool their experience and make joint suggestions.

The discussions also revealed a broad consensus on a number of issues. On the question of promoting genuinely child-friendly justice, participants stressed the need for legal instruments to protect children’s rights (e.g. better protection for children from adults who might re-offend). Concerning the situation of children growing up in urban environments, a number of speakers – including representatives of UNICEF and Kind in Samenleving – agreed on developing the idea of child-friendly cities in Europe (including the child-friendly school, better neighbourhood facilities for children, civic and social activity, etc.) and also involving young people in the decision-making processes in the cities in which they live. Elsewhere, participants noted a lack of information on youth policy issues. Ms Lissy Gröner, MEP, suggested a comprehensive report every three years on this topic. Also, developing youth policy could not be achieved without more resources.

Mr Georgios Sklavounos, EESC rapporteur and the president of the Association of Child-Friendly Cities, noted that the problems that the hearing had discussed, including child poverty, marginalisation and criminality, were so acute that they risked threatening “the very foundations of our society”.

Two new opinions on cohesion policy were adopted at the Committee’s July plenary. The Committee intends its opinion on the EU’s economic and social cohesion strategy* to be a contribution to the debate on the future of cohesion policy. The Committee points out the challenges confronting the EU (enlargement, globalisation, worsening of core-periphery imbalances, macroeconomic stability etc.) and goes on to sketch out the steps which in its view should be taken, in particular:

- maintenance of Objective 1 support after 2006; measures to overcome the negative statistical impact of enlargement on the average per capita GDP; raising the ceiling of 0.45% of GDP for the Structural Funds; establishing a budget instrument for stabilising regional income in the event of unforeseen economic shocks; strengthening the programme of Community initiatives; adopting an open method of coordination to tackle Objective 2 regions’ problems of economic and social cohesion; and giving priority to investments in disadvantaged areas.

In a separate opinion on the Future of cohesion policy in the context of enlargement and the learning society**, meanwhile, the Committee calls for a far-reaching reform of the cohesion policy’s principles, general conditions, structure and arrangements in the run-up to the accession of the CEECs to the EU. Given the need for streamlining, the Committee recommends establishing a single Fund, with sufficient flexibility, which would help in achieving more simple, and hence more transparent, procedures.

* Rapporteur: Mr Christie (Workers, UK)
** Rapporteur: Mr Malosse (Employers, France)
Two new Joint Consultative Committees are set up

The European ESC has recently helped set up two new Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs) with Slovenia and Estonia. Their aim is to promote dialogue and cooperation between socio-professional organisations and other interest groups from the accession countries and from the EU in the run-up to enlargement. Pictured below, EU-Estonia JCC co-chairmen Filip Hamro-Drotz and Kadi Parnits (who is also president of the Confederation of Estonian Trade Unions) together with EESC president Göke Frerichs.

The inaugural meeting of the EU-Slovenia JCC was held in Ljubljana on 11-12 June 2002. The first meeting of the EU-Estonia JCC, meanwhile, took place in Tallinn on 4-5 July 2002.

These two new JCCs bring the total number of such organizations to eight. The first JCC was set up with Turkey in 1995.

On the afternoon of 24 June the European Economic and Social Committee’s (EESC) three observers to the European Convention addressed the session devoted to civil society.

Mr Göke Frerichs, EESC president, began by expressing his hope that the Convention would pave the way for the European Union to increasingly become a union of citizens, rather than a union of states. He went on: ‘In a democratic union of this kind, which must necessarily be organised along federal lines … civil society must have a forum where its representatives can meet to express their common views, articulate their common demands and draw up their common proposals.’

A future European constitution “should give the Committee the resources and the scope to fulfil its role as the institutional representation of organised civil society in an ever more effective way”. Specifically Mr Frerichs proposed a public and transparent procedure for selecting and appointing EESC members, together with a rewording of the Treaty provision on the membership of the EESC as follows: “The Committee shall consist of representatives of business and employers’ associations, representatives of trade unions and representatives of other civil society organisations which pursue economic, social, cultural or non-material goals in the public interest.”

Mr Roger Brisch, president of the Committee’s Workers’ Group, pointed to the value of the EESC as a place of great diversity: “The Committee’s added value is based on the fact that when it formulates its opinions it draws in the whole range of civil society players – not just the social partners.” Given this diversity, the EESC was thus the Union’s natural place for civil dialogue.

Mr Brisch also called for the European social model, and in particular a reference to full employment, to be included in a future European constitution. The text should also spell out the Union’s place in the world as founded on peace, freedom and democracy – together with human rights and a commitment to eradicate poverty. He also called for the Charter on Fundamental Rights to be included in any future constitution. The Community method of decision-making, meanwhile, had proved its worth; what was now needed was a “democratic and federal structure” to give real meaning to European citizenship.

Mrs Anne-Marie Sigmund, president of the Committee’s Various Interests Group, told the Convention that the EESC was fully committed to involving as many sectors of civil society as possible in its work. Rather than act as a filter the Committee wanted to be a true institutional platform for civil society. The Committee was the right place to promote civil dialogue and to give it a structure, embracing organisations which are genuinely representative. Mrs Sigmund called for the Convention to set up a working group on civil dialogue, in which the EESC could make a constructive contribution.

Elsewhere, culture (including the issues of education, training and research) was a theme that the Convention should discuss further, and the principle of solidarity needed to be included explicitly in the Treaty.

Opinions adopted during the 392nd plenary session

European contract law (communication) 
Rapporteur: Mr Remmeau (Workers - France)

Action programme for customs in the Community (Customs 2007) 
Rapporteur: Mr Simpson (Various Interests - UK)

Research requirements for the security and safety of energy supplies (additional opinion) 
Rapporteur: Mr Wolf (Various Interests - Germany)

Action programme/Single European Sky 
Rapporteur: Mr Tosh (Employers - UK)

Compensation and assistance to air passengers in the event of denied boarding 
Rapporteur: Mr Green (Employers - Germany)

Safety of third countries’ aircraft using Community airports 
Rapporteur: Mr Santillan Cabeza (Workers - Spain)

Community financial assistance to improve the environmental performance of the freight transport system (Marco Polo) 
Rapporteur: Mr Levas (Employers - France)

Control of high activity sealed radioactive sources 
Rapporteur: Mr Wolf (Various Interests - Germany)

Export and import of dangerous chemicals 
Rapporteur: Mr Sklavounos (Various Interests - Greece)

Protection of geographical indications for agricultural products 
Rapporteur: Mr de las Heras Cabalas (Various Interests - Spain)

Crossborder movements of GMOs 
Rapporteur: Mr Espuny Moyano (Employers - Spain)

Seed of oil and fibre plants 
Rapporteur: Mr Sahin (Various Interests - France)

The future of cohesion policy in the context of enlargement and the learning society (additional own-initiative opinion) 
Rapporteur: Mr Malosse (Employers - France)

Direct company taxation (own-initiative) 
Co-rapporteur: Mrs Sánchez Miguel (Workers - Spain)

Improving the operation of taxation systems in the internal market (Fiscalis 2007) 
Rapporteur: Mr Benni Grosjean (Various Interests - Portugal)

Special VAT scheme for travel agents 
Rapporteur: Mr Walker (Employers - UK)

The integration of disabled people into society (own-initiative) 
Rapporteur: Mr Cabra de Luna (Various Interests Group – Spain)

SOCRATES (amendments) 
Rapporteur: Mr Bernabei (Employers - Italy)

A new strategy for health and safety at work (communication) 
Rapporteur: Mr Etty (Workers - Netherlands)

Social agenda (communication) 
Rapporteur: Mr Bloch-Laine (Various Interests - France)

Co-rapporteur: Mr Koryfidis (Workers – Greece)

Right to family reunification 
Rapporteur: Mr Mengozzi (Various Interests – Italy)

Romania on the road to accession (own-initiative) 
Rapporteur: Mr Bedossa (Various Interests - France)

Draft rules of procedure of the EESC 
Rapporteur-general: Mr de Paul de Barchofontaine (Various Interests - Belgium)

Services of general interest (exploratory opinion) 
Rapporteur: Mr Hernández Bataller (Various Interests - Spain)

Provisions relating to committees which assist the Commission 
Rapporteur-general: Mr Hernández Bataller (Various Interests - Spain)

Merger Control (Green Paper) 
Rapporteur: Mr Lagerholm (Employers - Sweden)

Guidelines for trans-European energy network 
Rapporteur: Mr von Schwerin (Workers - Germany)

Health and safety – self-employed persons 
Rapporteur: Mrs Schweng (Employers - Austria)

State aid for employment 
Rapporteur-general: Mr Zöhrer (Workers - Austria)

EU’s cultural and social cohesion strategy (own-initiative) 
Rapporteur: Mr Christie (Workers - UK)

Participation rules RTD/Euroatom 
Rapporteur-general: Mr Malosse (Employers - France)

Environmental liability with regard to the prevention and remediying of environmental damage 
Rapporteur: Mrs Sánchez Miguel (Workers - Spain)

European transport policy for 2010 (White Paper) 
Rapporteur: Mr García Alonso (Employers - Spain)

Slovenia on the road to accession (own-initiative) 
Rapporteur: Mr Confalonieri (Various Interests - Italy)

Strategy for the Internal Market (2002) (communication) 
Rapporteur: Mr Walker (Employers - UK)