Challenge of today: helping refugees arriving in Europe

EESC takes a pro-active approach

The current refugee crisis poses a variety of immediate challenges requiring EU action. The EESC has developed strong expertise in the field of migration since the early 2000s and has presented many progressive ideas in its opinions, even before migration became an absolute priority. It is therefore not surprising that one of the SOC section’s three priorities concerns refugees and migrants and that this is also considered one of the main overall EESC priorities.

Last autumn, therefore, the EESC Bureau decided to conduct 12 Going local missions, each comprising 3 members, in order to assess the situation in the countries most hit by the influx of refugees. These missions took place in December 2015 and January 2016 and all the members participating returned very enthusiastic about the intensive programme and the experience they had gained. Some of you were amongst them and you deserve our appreciation for being so interested and flexible. The first informal stock-taking meeting to gather experience from the majority of these missions took place immediately after the January EESC plenary and I had a pleasure of co-chairing it upon the invitation of the EESC vice president, Mr Lobo Xavier. The members who participated in the various missions gave a brief account of their experience, focusing on the problems that they witnessed and the main issues to be tackled at local, national and European level. Among the various issues highlighted was the need for better coordination at various levels (public sector, civil society organisations (NGOs and others) and the EU). Each contribution fell into one of four areas according to the stages of migration:

1. Countries of origin (and neighbouring countries) - including border control, combating smugglers and improving conditions for refugees
2. Arrival in Europe - here the most important factors is the proper functioning of hotspots and registration procedures
3. Transit across Europe - we are worried about the closing of borders in the Schengen area; it is clear that the Dublin rules need to be revised and that relocation and return policies need to be properly implemented.
4. Integration in destination – the absence of institutions was highlighted, as well as the need for a sustainable, long-term policy, education & training (of both refugees and migrants and those working with them) and labour market integration

There are a number of horizontal topics to be addressed; for example, the need for a truly common EU migration and integration policy and procedures, funding and human resources, the need to change the narrative/perception of refugees and migrants, as well as the challenge of dealing with a large number of unaccompanied minors.

An ad hoc group consisting of 16 members has been set up by the Bureau, which should prepare a summary report to be submitted to the March Bureau and March plenary session, in the presence of Commissioner Avramopoulos. At the same time, I also have the pleasure of cooperating with Christa Schweng from Group I and Anne Demelenne from Group II on the development of the EESC strategy on refugees and migrants, which will certainly benefit from the input of the final report on the Going local missions, but will have a longer term perspective and a broader scope. The aim of the strategy is to give a shape to the numerous ongoing EESC initiatives by building on the work done by the EESC so far and by adding new elements based on the hands-on experience of our members. It shall situate all EESC activities in this area within a coherent framework and make them more visible and easier to understand.

We believe that in order to better contribute to the resolution of refugee crisis and policies for integration of migrants, EESC should become a stronger and more visible EU actor. It should be recognized as the main supporter of organised civil society and its activities in this area. It will be channelising its needs, observations and recommendations towards other EU institutions, European citizens and their organisations. By adding our expertise, as well as European and global perspectives, the EESC will further contribute to the development of the EU policies in these areas.
The afternoon, the category asked the TEN Section President, Pierre Jean COULON, to study groups. Spokespersons put forward the possibility of a “Minority declaration” by the presentation of members to the rest of the category and set out the state of play in current chapter in the TTIP negotiations (Luca DE CARLI, policy officer at DG TRADE), EU SME policies as administrative burdens, vocational training, access to finance and support for start-ups. The Category welcomed Commission officials presenting the latest developments on the SME Consumer Day. Finally, the spokespersons briefly mentioned the 2016 work programme. The end of Schengen could lead to a serious crisis of the single market, meaning less growth and fewer jobs. This will cause immeasurable damage, economically, politically and socially. In the absence of freedom of movement, the purpose of the single currency would become even lower. Beyond the economic benefits, free movement also promotes cultural integration among Europeans. Mobility is necessary for the development of intercultural understanding and a sense of unity among Europeans. Regarding trade, the restoration of border controls would lead to higher costs for companies, which would be passed on to products, consumers and families. In this respect, a return to national borders would only multiply monitoring costs without improving its effectiveness, not to mention strengthening of the role and earnings of ‘smugglers’. Group III, representing European civil society, points out that what Europe needs is not less Europe but rather more Europe: joint control of EU external borders or a defence and common security policy. Everything must be done to save the Schengen area, and this requires a well-controlled European policy on legal migration.

DEBATE ON SCHENGEN

During the Group III meeting on 20 January, president Luca Jahier entered the debate on the Schengen crisis, expressing his full support for maintaining the agreement Freedom of movement within the Schengen area is one of the pillars of the EU. Faced with the crisis, European leaders sometimes find themselves caught between their partners and public opinion. The arguments they use with one or the other are sometimes contradictory.

On behalf of civil society, Group III expressed its unconditional support for maintaining the Schengen area on the basis that questioning the Schengen area, even temporarily, will inevitably shake the foundations of the European Union.

Besides its symbolic significance, Group III took a look at some of the economic advantages associated with the area:
- There are 1.7 million cross-border workers
- Around 1.25 billion people cross borders every year
- Europe has 24 million business trips per year
- There are 57 million cross-border road journeys per year

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Within this context, the Various Interests’ Group has decided to take ‘Europe’ to the UK and specifically, to Manchester. In particular, the objectives of the conference include:
- To engage with, listen to and learn from British civil society and citizens;
- To provide a forum for local civil society organisations, citizens, the media, economic, social and political actors to come together and openly debate the pros and cons of continued membership of the EU;
- To demonstrate that the EESC and European civil society recognise the importance of the topic and that the decision of the UK referendum will have direct repercussions for both the UK and other EU Member States.

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The topic of product lifetime has started to become a dominant issue in many debates on consumer practices. It should be noted that the European Economic and Social Committee was the first European body to draft a text – in 2013 – on planned obsolescence (ECMI / 112). On Saturday, 23 January 2016, we were invited to discuss progress on the matter at an afternoon debate devoted to this topic. The audience came in large numbers, which is proof that the subject attracts wide-spread interest. The participants were especially attentive to the social aspects of planned obsolescence, including the potential for jobs generated by goods being more easily repaired. Some participants suggested launching a citizens’ initiative on this matter. Looking ahead, the next step will be the publication in early March of the first study on the impact of displaying product lifetimes on consumer behaviour – a study also launched by the Committee.

SOCIAL WELFARE – INNOVATIVE AND SUSTAINABLE

On 28th of January 2016, the Association of German Social Welfare Organizations (BAGPW eV) organised a conference in Berlin on social welfare, in cooperation with the German Ministry for Families, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth

Under the chairmanship of EESC Member Prof. SCHLÜTER (DE) the workshop on the topic of social policy in Europe presented and compared the welfare systems of Germany, the UK and Sweden.

Mr. Prof. Cremer, Secretary General of Caritas Germany presented the so called „triangular relationship“, which is a key principle of German social law. EESC Member Mrs. Ariane RODERT (SE) explained the Swedish model. Former EESC Member Mrs. Maureen O’NEILL introduced the audience to the UK model.

According to Mrs. Rodert, the Swedish welfare system is traditionally state driven, but is currently undergoing major changes. The former strong position of public providers in the area of social and health services is more and more taken over by private non-profit organisations. After the compliance with relevant regulations is checked, local authorities grant private service providers the permission to commence their activities. As a result consumers are free to choose between various providers. This freedom of choice is however subject to restrictions which depend on the concrete social service which is to be delivered and the different funding models.

Prof. Cremer pointed out that a harmonisation of national welfare systems would be utopic. However, a stronger coordination of Europe’s national welfare systems would be useful. Ariane Rodert and Maureen O’Neill argued that the EU should play a stronger role in the area of social policy, but that so far the member states have blocked most of the initiatives. The participants concluded that legally binding European principles, ensuring for example the access of all Europeans to high quality and affordable social services, should be introduced.

SPECIAL FEATURE: Tunisia’s National Dialogue Quartet in the EESC, by President of REX section Dilyana SLAVOVA (BG)

Tunisia’s National Dialogue Quartet, which was awarded the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize, were guests at the EESC. The EESC recognises the critical role civil society organisations play in consolidating the democratic process, essential work that has long been acknowledged and supported by the European Union.

The EU has supported, on an individual basis, the members of the Quartet and consulted regularly with them. Our collaboration with them became stronger following the fall of President Ben Ali in 2011 and the creation of the Quartet in 2013.

The Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet are the architects of a unique transition towards democracy in which civil society has played, and continues to play, a decisive role in preserving national unity and democracy, making possible the adoption of a Constitution that protects the principles of a pluralistic society, the rule of law and human rights.

“The Quartet’s determination and sense of responsibility serve as a model for crisis resolution in the region,” This is why Ms Mogherini said that “only national unity and the promotion of democracy pave the way towards peace and stability.” We at the EESC will remain committed to supporting Tunisian civil society organisations as they continue to strengthen and protect their democratic system. We will do so through our work in the EuroMediterranean area, a region with which we have been involved since 1995.

THE FUTURE OF THE EU URBAN AGENDA


The meeting was opened by outstanding personalities in the field of social economy, amongst which our Group III colleague and Vice-President of Social Economy Europe Alain COHEUR (FR).

In his opening remarks, M. COHEUR pointed out that the social economy should not limit its scope of activities to the fight against poverty and social exclusion, but considers plural economy to be essential for the well-functioning of the market. Its goal should therefore be the creation of a different economic model based on a new, more transparent, sustainable, and, ultimately, more accountable business model.

M. COHEUR emphasized the diversity of activities within the social economy, which demonstrates that a sustainable economic model and social objectives can go hand in hand. The social economy carries the project of a society based on respect for others, tolerance, equality, social justice and solidarity.

M. COHEUR ended his opening speech by insisting that each and every one of us can, through the institution in which we work, help create this society. “If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favorable”. M. COHEUR quoted Roman philosopher Seneca, so let us not be afraid to question our system, to build and develop alternatives on which our citizens can rely, even when the winds are contrary. Also, let us bear in mind: alone, we will not succeed.
Overview of our Members’ Work in the EESC

Lutz RIBBE (DE) – TEN/578 "Delivering a New Deal for Energy Consumers" (EESC opinion 5067/15)
The EESC welcomes the Commission’s analysis and firmly supports its proposals. It is high time to place consumers at the heart of European energy policy and to provide them with comprehensive opportunities for active participation.

The question of how to design energy systems is of strategic importance. What is needed is competition to design the most efficient overall system. This goes far beyond production and conventional marketing.

Demand response will play a central role. To this end, the technical conditions (smart meters, smart grids) must first of all be established on the consumer side and should be understood and financed as part of grid development.

Demand response systems could be used by consumers to do more than just adapt their energy consumption and thereby save money. As the Commission quite rightly points out, "the combination of decentralised generation and storage options with demand side flexibility can further enable consumers to become their own suppliers and managers for (a part of) their energy needs, becoming producers and consumers and reduce their energy bills" ("prosumers").

New incentive schemes must be developed that reward efforts to design self-consumption, direct supply, storage of surplus energy and the provision of control power, i.e. active load management for all market participants, in a way which benefits the system.


The EESC welcomes the communication and consultation process on a new energy market design. "Completing European Monetary Union: Policies of the Eurozone and the case of Greece" – ECO/401

The goal of a low-carbon energy supply, with a high proportion of adjustable renewable energy sources, can only be achieved through establishing a careful balance between markets and regulation. To date, this has not been properly discussed at the political level and nor does the communication do so.

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