LET'S BE RIGHT WITH ACCESSIBILITY

Group III Member Ioannis Vardakastanis (EL) addressing the UN Assembly in New York in 2013

During the past 20th century, an entire international legal framework in the protection of Human Rights was developed. The UN conventions did not create new rights but recognition that due to structural barriers, stereotypes and traditions in our societies cannot be enjoyed by all citizens. In 21st century, the first UN Human Rights Convention (and the only one so far) was devoted to the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and for the first time ever, a Human Rights treaty was signed and concluded by the European Union (since 2011 entered into force for the EU).

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) is a ground breaking international instrument. It is ground-breaking because it is the world’s most quickly negotiated and ratified human rights treaty and it is also unprecedented because it was negotiated with direct participation of persons with disabilities and their families. The UN CRPD has to date 213 States Parties, and 107 non-States Parties, but as many as 165 persons with disabilities addresses of the European Parliament, Committee on Civil Rights and Freedoms have signed as an important step forward in the rights of persons with disabilities.

The UN CRPD constitutes a human right in itself and therefore its full implementation must lead to the creation of the necessary conditions by means of legal and policy measures to enable persons with disabilities to access all kind of environments and aspects of life. It is crucial to their full enjoyment of civil and political rights, as well as their social, economic, and cultural rights. Accessibility benefits the whole of society.

The implications of this vision are not simply a declaration; they constitute a whole new approach to the obligations of the EU in this field. The EU cannot contemplate the UN CRPD as a simple international declaration but as a meaningful policy programme with legal implications in order to ensure the inclusion of 80 million Europeans with disabilities:

- starting with ensuring the accessibility of their premises, access to websites and documents,
- recognising accessibility as a basic prerequisite for sustainability and its social dimension, in combating poverty and marginalisation and promoting social cohesion.

The second step is to look at the activities that the EU and its members have to put in place. It is of utmost importance that a human rights approach is included in the implementation of the European semester. The mechanisms of European governance have to be adjusted to this new reality. The EU has to lead with exemplarity if it wants to recover citizens’ confidence. There are specific steps in the area of Accessibility that should be implemented already now; unblocking the Proposal for a Directive on implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation; the European Commission (EC) has to fulfil its long-standing commitment and present a legally-binding European Accessibility Act; and the conclusion of the current Proposal for a Directive on the accessibility of public sector bodies’ websites. These are strong requests coming from the EESC. We can see with satisfaction that some areas have already integrated this approach, for example, EU institutions adopted the inclusion of compulsory ex ante-conditions on accessibility and disability in the current Structural Funds regulations. No EU funds can be spent to build new physical barriers and without participation of organisations from civil society, including persons with disabilities in the new programming period 2014 -2020. This shows that when there is commitment from the EU institutions, then it is feasible.

The EESC opinion (TEN/515) reflects on the basic principles of accessibility as a Human Right, the policy areas to be affected and the instruments to be put in place. It also reflects on the importance of participation, good statistical data and awareness-raising as fundamental mechanisms. The future of Europe will be better accessible to all citizens or it will not be. Europe has the capacity to recover from the crisis stronger if it chooses the social way out. Inclusion of persons with disabilities will bring the untapped potential of 16% of the European population. Accessibility is a human right for every single citizen and inclusive societies have to be the guiding principle of social Europe. A modern approach to human rights will lead Europe to a better and more prosperous future.

In a time where some old-fashioned ideas are coming back to our political scenarios, today more than ever it is the time for the EU to respond via opening society to all, by including all, by ensuring that a new Europe is built on human rights, solidarity, and accessibility. Let’s give access to rights in Europe, let’s be right with accessibility.

This Editorial on the own-initiative opinion ‘Accessibility as a Human Right for persons with disabilities’ was written by Ioannis Vardakastanis, Rapporteur for the EESC opinion of this title TEN/515 – EESC 3005/10/03, which was adopted by the EESC at its January 2014 Plenary Session in Brussels.

Editorial

Europe III

The voice of Group III

Various Interests

February 2014

SPECIAL FEATURE: EESC co-organises “Social Entrepreneurs – Have Your Say!” in Strasbourg

On January 16-17 the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Commission co-hosted the “Social Entrepreneurs - Have Your Say!” social enterprise event in Strasbourg. Close to 2000 social economy actors and social entrepreneurs, an EESC delegation of more than 30, three Commissioners, senior politicians and interested stakeholders gathered to debate the growing role of social economy enterprises in Europe. A key aim was to take stock of the progress of the agenda to date and how to further develop and grow the social economy enterprise sector in Europe.

The EESC has been pushing the need for a political agenda to create an enabling environment for social economy enterprise growth and development for many years. Through extensive opinion work and various activities we have provided the EU institutions with our specific social economy expertise. When the Commission launched the Social Business Initiative (2011) we were actively involved in the process and now in its continuation. In the view of upcoming European elections the event was therefore very timely. To co-organise an event with the Commission of this magnitude was both an opportunity and a challenge. A key aim was to ensure high-level interactivity. Throughout the event, parallel with plenary sessions, participants joined thematic workshops, World Café and Open Space sessions to share experiences, express concerns and put forward their ideas of concrete actions for this sector in the future. The results from all these parallel...
enterprises and along with the EU Member States, they should on all the actions in the SBI and the proposals of the final at the same time, have created new jobs. The Strasbourg service provision, have carried out innovative activities and, co-operatives experimented with new solutions for social climate. Over the last few years, social enterprises and social crucial role of social enterprises in the current economic evaluate The Social Business Initiative actions and the impact concrete actions to the next commission and parliament in the recommendations in the Declaration aims to hand over – “Social Entrepreneurs – Make it Happen!”, which based on sector. Starting in February we are launching an EESC project starting point of the next phase for our work supporting this historical contexts, common policy at European level is central. between east and west of Europe and different national and divide landscape for social economy enterprise is very diverse in the member states. In most cases there is still a lack of national actions and support programmes this sector. With the the landscape for social economy enterprise varies widely in the member states. In most cases there is still a lack of national the EU has finally opened a new page regarding the development of social enterprises and recognizes their potential to contribute to a different and more sustainable form of growth: all actors and the Member States now have to make every effort to exploit the potential of these communities which have been opened up to us!”

Mr Guerini commented: “The event was very important to co-create The Social Business Initiative actions and the impact at national level. The high level our debate underlined the crucial role of social enterprises in the current economic climate. Over the last few years, social enterprises and social co-operatives experimented with new solutions for social service provision, have carried out innovative activities and, at the same time, have created new jobs. The Strasbourg Declaration reflects the point of view and the needs of European social entrepreneurs and the role they want play the future of Europe. Now, the EU Institutions must follow through on all the actions in the SBI and the proposals of the final declaration to promote the growth and development of social enterprises and along with the EU Member States, they should reinforce the role of social enterprises in structural reforms to help exit the crisis.”

Further information can be found on the EESC web site: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.events-and-activities-social-entrepreneurs

More about the event is on the Commission web site, where you can sign the Strasbourg Declaration and watch the video recordings of the proceedings: http://ec.europa.eu/internal_market/conferences/2014/0116-social-entrepreneurs/index_en.htm
The Various Interests’ Group of the European Economic and Social Committee is organizing a one-week conference in Berlin from Monday 24 to Sunday 30 March 2014 at the Zeppelin Exhibition Hall. Following on from the successful conference which took place in Thessaloniki on 31 May 2013, entitled “The impact of the Crisis on Greek Citizens: Moving forward towards recovery” the main objective of the conference in Athens will be to examine how Greece can move forward towards growth, thus overcoming the socio-economic consequences of the crisis. It is hoped that the debates will explore opportunities for sustainable growth, employment and recovery in Greece, but also encourage steps towards solidarity and a Europe built on social cohesion. Various eminent Greek dignitaries have been invited to speak and it is expected that around 200 representatives of organised civil society from across Greece and the EU will attend. To consult the draft agenda, please go to http://www.eesc.europa.eu/it/portal-en/events-and-activities-greece-growth-recovery

Mrs Reine-Claude MADER (FR) is the Rapporteur for the study group for the own-initiative opinion on: “Consumer protection and the relationship with third countries” – REX/398.

Mr Thomas PALMGREN (FI) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “European immigration policy and the relationship with third countries” – REX/398.

Mr Mario CAMPLI (IT) is the Rapporteur working alone for the information group for the own-initiative opinion on: “Youth employment, training, employment, tools for equality” – NAT/631.

Mr Gabriel SARRÓ IPARRAGUIRRE (ES) is the Rapporteur for the exploratory opinion on: “Industrial changes in the European packaging sector” – CCMI/122.

The key to overcoming hunger at global level is the development of a productive, adaptable and resilient agriculture sector based on three key elements: diversity, sustainability and productivity. However, in many places, efforts to establish efficient structures in agriculture face major challenges. The increasing competition for scarce natural resources, the consequences of climate change and the loss of biodiversity and soil fertility all constitute obstacles to using and utilising agricultural production potential. Economic and financial crises and the increasing volatility on the agricultural markets lessen the inclination to invest in the agricultural sector and consequently reduce the sector’s productivity. Extreme weather events threaten agricultural structures. In addition to this, in many places tackling the current challenges is made even more difficult by other factors such as social inequality, a lack of know-how and a lack of access to education and capital. Agriculture and rural areas can be strengthened and made more resilient in the face of these challenges. The agricultural sector needs three key elements for this; it must:

- **Use diversity**: Diverse production helps to increase agricultural resilience. This involves the conservation and sustainable cultivation of local plant varieties and animal breeds and the valorisation and harnessing of genetic resources as an important basis for plant breeding. Diversity saves lives!
- **Ensure sustainability**: An improved and thus sustainable management of natural resources, especially soil and water, is a key requirement for having an agricultural sector which is adapted to climate change. Only sustainable agriculture geared to climate protection can contribute to combating global hunger. Sustainability is the future!
- **Increase productivity**: The global agricultural sector must be put in a position to meet the food requirements of a growing world population. An increased production must be sustainable and socially responsible. This has to be seen in the light of an increasing scarcity of resources. To this end we need technology, expertise and investments. Productivity creates food!

The full listing of membership of the study groups for the new work may be consulted here: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/portal-en/group-3-new-study-groups

**Highlights of the January 2014 EESC Plenary Session**

**Group III Members in the Spotlight playing a key role**

PEDRO NARRO (ES) WELCOMES YOUNG FARMERS TO THE EESC ALONG WITH PRESIDENT MALOSSE

On 28 January 2014, more than 400 young farmers from 22 Member States participated in the II Congress of Young Farmers organised by the European Parliament. The EESC, in conjunction with the EP, hosted the welcome reception for the participants. It was a very successful gathering where Group III member, Pedro Narro, explained the EESC’s work and with young farmers. In his welcome speech Pedro stated that “without generational review in farms, agricultural sustainability will never be a reality but a Utopia. Only 6% of European farmers are under 35 old. To reverse this trend, it is essential to raise awareness, to create new instruments and to effectively protect our rural areas. The EESC is committed to showing solidarity with young farmers, to channelising their ideas, promoting discussions and defending a model where young farmers are treated as a priority.”

THE GREEN WEEK IN BERLIN: USE DIVERSITY, ENSURE SUSTAINABILITY, INCREASE PRODUCTIVITY

Established in 1926, the International Green Week (IGW) took place for the 79th time in January 2014 in Berlin. The IGW is a one-of-a-kind international exhibition for the food, agricultural and horticultural industries. At the same time, the IGW is the point of origin for the Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (GFFA) with more than 80 departmental ministers. Producers from all over the world come to IGW to test market food and luxury items and reinforce their brand image. Following consumer trends, regional sourcing plays an increasingly important role: Renewable resources, organic agricultural and products, Fair Trade, rural development and gardening continue to gain importance at International Green Week.

In terms of agricultural policy, the importance of the exhibition is clearly demonstrated by the presence of 200 foreign ministers and state secretaries in addition to prime ministers, ministers and state secretaries from Germany. This year the biggest events were the International Agricultural Ministers’ Conference in conjunction with Berlin’s 5th Agricultural Ministers’ Summit, the 5th International Agricultural and Food Industry Forum, the 6th Future Forum for Rural Development and the Biofuel Congress. Of course the most significant for experts and professionals was the Global Forum for Food and Agriculture (GFFA) – an international conference that focuses on central questions concerning the future of the global agri-food industry. It was held during International Green Week (IGW) and for the sixth time. The forum titled “Empowering Agriculture: Fostering Resilience – Secure Food and Nutrition” covered one of the biggest global challenges that we have to face internationally: the question of safeguarding comprehensive food and nutrition security. The key to conquer hunger, starvation and malnutrition is developing a highly performant yet sustainable agriculture. For many years, the international goal has been creating a high-yielding agricultural grid work and thus tapping the full potential of agriculture. Economic, ecological and social obstacles however hinder progress in many cases. Countries, regions and entire people fight with problems like scarcity of natural resources, increasing volatility of the agricultural market, loss of biodiversity and decreasing soil fertility. Discussions at the conference focused on how agriculture and rural areas can cope more effectively with economical, ecological and social changes and crises (e.g. production risks and market disruption, the degradation of natural resources, climate change) while at the same time performing their central task of ensuring food security.

**Quote of the month…**

““One day the great European War will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Balkans…””


**News from Group III**

Mr Richard ADAMS (UK) is the President of the study group for the opinion on: “The revision of the EU emission trading system” – NAT/633.

Mr Viliam PÁLENÍK (SK) is the President of the study group for the exploratory opinion on: “European immigration policy and the relationship with third countries” – REX/398.

Mr Panagiotis GKOFRAS (EL) is the Rapporteur for the exploratory opinion on: “European immigration policy and the relationship with third countries” – REX/398.

Mr Pedro NARRO (ES) is the Rapporteur for the information report on: “The economic and social situation of young people in the EU28 regions” – REX/398.

Mrs Mall HELLAM (IE) is the Rapporteur for the own-initiative opinion on: “Civil society in Russia” – REX/400.

Ms Marina ŠKRABALO (HR) is the Rapporteur for the own-initiative opinion on: “Enhancing Transparency and Inclusiveness of Accession Negotiations” – REX/401.

**“One day the great European War will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Balkans…”” (uttered in 1888)**
Overview of our Members’ Work in the EESC

Other news that matters

In keeping with the introduction of a new innovation some months ago, experts from various fields of experience are invited to address our Group meetings on important and controversial topics of current interest to inform our members, provoke debate and facilitate an exchange views.

On Tuesday 21 January 2014, we welcomed Jennifer de Nijis, who is a Senior Advisor to the League of Young Voters, (see the interview in our October 2013 edition – link below), responsible for the Strategic Coordination and Public Relations. She has participated in the development of the initiative since its launch in 2011. It is a core project that has been developed as a separate European Youth Forum initiative and the league consists of a network of partners working on the European elections and youth (Votewatch Europe and IDEA – the International Education Association) in cooperation with the IDEA and is due to be published and disseminated this month, February 2014. She went on to tell us of their plans to launch information events, intensify the campaign and increase publicity, in the run-up to the EP elections in May 2014. Her intervention was followed by a lively discussion with the members of Group III.

More information can be found here:
http://www.youngvoters.eu/eu/about

Europe II – October 2013

The study can be read by:
http://www.youthforum.org/assets/2014/02/YFJ-LYV_StudyOnYouthAbsenteeism_WEB.pdf

The “Consumer and environment” category met on Friday 14 February 2014 to discuss the issue of “Farmed fish: what impacts to the health of consumers and the environment?” Mr. Don Stanford, Director of the NGO “Protect Wild Scotland” made a presentation on the environmental impact of salmon farming in toxic aquaculture forms and their impact on the health of consumers. The issue of the sustainability of fish farming was addressed by the Commission representatives. Mr. Paolo Caricato and Mr. Frans Verstraete (DG SANCO) and Mr. Dario Dubolino and Ms. Isabel Sanz (DG MARE) who presented the regulations and projects managed by their respective DGs.

Mr. Ludwig Willeneger, representative of the EDEKA group, came to present various retail initiatives to improve fisheries and aquaculture products. The speakers then replied to many questions posed by the members as well as a number by outside guests. The meeting, co-hosted by Ms. Made and Mr. Cinigl, was a great success given the presence of many external participants in the Committee.

The Farmers’ Category is due to meet on Wednesday 5 March 2014. Amongst other agenda items are a presentation by Pierre Bascou, Head of Unit E1, Unit for Agricultural Policy, Analysis and Perspectives of DG Agriculture and Rural Development, on the theme of “The implementation of the CAP reform”. Group III member Luz Ribbe (DE), President of the Sustainable Development Observatory, will take part in the exchange of views with the category members, who will then go 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 will hold 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 will take place, 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 will also provide the opportunity to update members on recent developments in the Cooperative Sector and on the draft EESC Operational Statute for a European Mutual Society.

It is with a heavy heart that we bid farewell to our stagiaire, Lina Vosyliute, from Lithuania. She is a Human Rights Advocate, especially passionate about the rights of migrants and Roma people. For this reason, she has been actively participating for more than 10 years within various NGOs in Lithuania, Malta, Hungary and South Africa. In 2011, she graduated from the Human Rights MA programme in Budapest based Central European University, Legal Studies Department. Lina arrived at a very timely moment and was of enormous assistance to us with the organisation of our conference in Vilnius last October. Amongst other tasks, she assisted with the co-ordination of the work of the Categories of Group III. Lina also worked along with her fellow stagiaires, on a communications’ Strategy for the EESC, using their fresh eyes and ears, to take a good look at the Committee and see what works and what doesn’t. The results of their observations were compiled into a document and their proposals were presented to Jane MORKRICE (UK), Vice-President of the EESC, with responsibility for Communications and the EESC President, Henri MALDAGGE (FR).

We wish her all the very best in her future endeavours and are confident that, with her excellent work ethic and calm demeanour, she will have a successful and fulfilling career ahead of her. Go for it Lina!