



European Economic and Social Committee

PLENARY SESSION OF THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE

STOCKTAKING OF THE WORK PROGRAMME of Dr Anne-Marie SIGMUND

President of the European Economic and Social Committee

TERM OF OFFICE: 2004-2006

1. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Dear Colleagues,

Two years ago I set before you a very ambitious work programme for my term of office as EESC president, covering the period 2004-06. The programme was based on three priorities:

- 1) The underlying thread was my firm conviction that, in order for the EESC to be able to provide an increased "added value" to the European decision-making process, it would be better for us to concentrate our work on politically important core areas.
- 2) With that aim in mind, we did, however, also need to undertake a radical renewal of our working arrangements and methods.
- 3) In order to ensure that our work is both efficient and up-to-date, we also need to have optimal cooperation with strategic partners; a further priority for me has therefore been to bring about a targeted improvement in our network.

Setting priorities

Concentrating on priority issues has borne fruit. Above all, it has led to an increase in specific cooperation with the other Institutions and has thus improved the impact of the EESC's work. This has been demonstrated by the fact that, during my term of office, the EESC has, for the first time, been directly requested to carry out work by the European Council. Such requests have since been repeated, in respect of a variety of fields. This is an important milestone for the EESC.

Working arrangements and methods

In order to enable the EESC to address the priority issues more effectively, it was essential to modernise its working arrangements and methods. I welcome the fact that the EESC Bureau and the plenary session endorsed this standpoint. By amending the Rules of Procedures and adopting back-up decisions, the formal prerequisites were established, in the course of my term of office, for enabling the EESC to focus on priority issues.

Strategic partners

In a world based on networking, the EESC will only be able to fulfil its role of providing a "bridge for civil society" to an optimal degree by working in close coordination with external partners. I therefore listed relations with the other Institutions and other strategic allies as being one of the special priorities of the EESC's work during my term of office. Over the last two years we also achieved notable successes in this field.

Stocktaking

In all three areas – priority issues, working methods and relations with partners – we mapped out a decisive course of action over the last two years. The survey set out below is not designed to replace the detailed activity report drawn up by the general secretariat. My intention is rather to highlight a number of particularly important "partial victories".

Expression of thanks

One thing is quite clear to me: the successful implementation of my work programme, first of all, involved a large amount of – often additional – work for all concerned.

I should like to thank you all – dear colleagues and staff members alike – for your commitment and your cooperation; we all have a share in the successes which have been achieved.

2. CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES

In the speech which I gave on taking up office as EESC president, I set out a number of special priorities for the work of the Committee. The Committee has passed important tests in all of these fields.

Lisbon Strategy

I should like to turn first of all to the Lisbon Strategy. During my term of office, the EESC recorded a number of landmark achievements in this field in a variety of different ways.

A real "première" for the EESC occurred when the European Council, meeting at the 2005 Spring Council, directly requested the Committee to carry out work on its behalf. The mandate to promote the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy, working together with a network of national economic and social councils and similar bodies, signified for the EESC a recognition of its institutional role at the highest European level of decision-making.

The close cooperation between the EESC and the national and economic social councils in connection with the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy took on a new dimension with the publication of the Summary Report of March 2006. This form of cooperation does, in my opinion, point the way forward for future action.

At the 2006 Spring Summit, the European Council paid tribute to the efforts made by the EESC and renewed its mandate in connection with the Lisbon Strategy. Our next report will, accordingly, be submitted to the 2008 Summit. Building on the positive experience gained earlier, this new report may be even more detailed and will address separately the

individual priority issues highlighted by the Council. Work on this report has already started.

Sustainability

The sustainability strategy was, and continues to be, a further priority issue for the EESC. Sustainability has been identified as a goal of European "added value"; the EESC organised a special Stakeholders Forum on the subject of sustainable development in April 2005. This forum was followed, in March 2006, by an inter-institutional hearing organised by the EESC in connection with an opinion which it drew up in response to a request from the Austrian presidency of the Council.

In this latter case, too, our efforts were recognised at the highest level: at its meeting in June 2006 the European Council entrusted the EESC with a very concrete mandate to carry out additional work on this subject. The internal measures required in order to enable the Committee to fulfil this mandate were decided upon right at the end of my term of office.

European economic and social model

The European social model – a further priority of our work programme of December 2004 – became a focal point of media interest one year later following the discussion held by the EU Heads of State and Government at Hampton Court in the UK.

Our opinion on this issue was therefore just as highly topical as the two-day joint conference organised in collaboration with the ILO in June 2006. At this latter event, the EESC gained attention by adopting a highly innovative approach. Our European economic and social model was examined in detail not only from the usual European perspective but also from an international perspective.

Communicating Europe – Plan D

We also made a major effort to tackle a challenge faced jointly by all European Institutions, namely that of stimulating (once again) interest in Europe on the part of the citizens of the European Union.

In 2004 we jointly concluded that this was a long-term project. We adopted highly innovative approaches towards tackling this issue, not only in Brussels itself but also at a level which was as close as possible to the people concerned. By way of example of such action, I should like to draw attention, in particular, to the series of *Stakeholder Forums*, which attracted widespread attention and by means of which we established direct channels of communication between the people of the EU and official bodies in Brussels. A series of local student projects on the subject of *Communicating Europe* was also published in EESC brochures.

The efforts in this field were carried out primarily by you, the members of the European Economic and Social Committee, working together with organisations and networks which you represent. I should like to take this opportunity to extend to you my warmest thanks for the personal commitment you have displayed in this field; as a result of these efforts, the Committee has become a close institutional partner of the European Commission in this area of activity and the profile of the Committee has been enhanced beyond the borders of Brussels.

Debate on the future of Europe – civil dialogue

I had intended to retain as a priority the debate on the future of Europe and Europe's identity, over and above the work of the Constitutional Convention. The choice of this issue as a priority became all the more topical, in an undesirable way, following the "No" votes in the referendums held on the constitution in France and the Netherlands.

The EESC drew up a series of opinions and organised a number of events on this subject. The European Parliament's Committee on Constitutional Affairs asked the EESC to hold a hearing of organised civil society on the subject of the draft Constitution.

During the Austrian Presidency of the EU Council, a high point was reached in the EESC's involvement in inter-institutional cooperation on this issue: the EESC was invited, together with the European Commission, to serve as the joint organiser of the prestigious conference on the *Sound of Europe*, held in Salzburg in January 2006.

European identity

In September 2006 I deliberately decided to give the traditional biennial conference of the EESC the form of a follow-up conference on this subject. By way of preparation for this conference, a series of *Thursday meetings* devoted to the subject of *what binds Europe together* was held every second plenary week. The abovementioned conference on the European social model also played a key role in the preparations for the September 2006 conference.

Participatory democracy

The draft European Constitution, which has, in the meantime been put on the back burner, backed up the traditional model of representative democracy with the model of participatory democracy. Irrespective of when the European Constitution comes into force, the EESC, in its role as the institutional partner in the civil dialogue, has a key role to play in the further development of these principles.

An important instrument in this context is the Liaison Group for

European Civil Society Organisations, which will be described in greater detail at a later stage. I continue to have great expectations as regards this structured cooperation, which has also become an established part of the cooperation between the EESC and the European Commission.

EESC prize for civil society At the beginning of my term of office, I announced the introduction of an EESC prize for civil society. The prize was awarded for the first time in 2006. This year I decided that the prize would be awarded for civil society contributions to the promotion of the European identity. The future fields to be covered by the prize will be determined by the successive EESC presidencies. I took the view that it was important that, over time, this prize should take account of as many aspects of civil society action as possible.

EU neighbourhood policy In the context of the EU's neighbourhood policy – a further priority area for the EESC – the Committee made a whole series of specific contributions, some of which had been requested by the European Commission, whilst the remainder had received special support from the Commission.

EUROMED The EU's southern neighbours, i.e. the EUROMED states, remain a special priority area. The civil society summit, held in Amman, Jordan, and jointly organised by the EESC, was overshadowed by the terrorist attacks which took place just before the conference. The summit therefore demonstrated all the more clearly the importance of our efforts to strengthen civil society in this region, including our assistance towards the establishment of economic and social councils.

A notable *première* was the invitation extended to me to present to the Heads of State and Government at the EUROMED Summit in Barcelona in November 2005 the results of ten years of work by the EESC in connection with our mandate under the *Barcelona Process*.

Eastern neighbours Amongst the Eastern neighbours of the EU, a very lively dialogue has been developed with Ukraine, a country in which the EESC has become a direct discussion partner of the government with regard to the establishment and strengthening of organised civil society. Initial contacts with civil society organisations in Belarus were also established.

Balkans The Western Balkans Civil Society Forum, organised in Brussels by the EESC in March 2006, brought together representatives of civil society organisations in this region. Our Liaison Group took up my proposal and agreed to cooperate in areas of synergy with the EU's special coordinator

of the Stability Pact, Mr Busek.

*Acceding states and
candidate states*

Observers from Romania and Bulgaria were already involved in the work of the EESC in 2006 in preparation for the accession of these two states to the EU. All the necessary measures for extending the membership of the EESC to include representatives from these two countries have been put in place. I carried out preparatory official visits to both of these states.

I personally made representations – with success – to the European Commission with a view to the establishment of a forum for discussion with civil society representatives from Croatia; such a body was important as the treaty links between the EU and Croatia do not make provision for the establishment of a Joint Consultative Committee.

Latin America

The EESC organised a meeting of civil society representatives prior to the EU-Latin America/Caribbean Summit held in Vienna in May 2006. The meeting of civil society representatives organised by the EESC took place in April 2006 and brought together representatives from leading civil society organisations from the region. In this case, too, I was invited to attend the subsequent summit of Heads of State and Government in order to present, in person, the results of our work.

Asia

Against the background of the geopolitical developments taking place in Asia, relations between the EESC and civil society bodies on this continent are also becoming more dynamic.

*EU-India Round Table –
a model for a future EU-
China Round Table*

I have made considerable efforts with a view to having the successful EU-India Round Table serve as a model for a future EU-China Round Table. The preparations designed to achieve this goal have made considerable progress and the EU-China Round Table is expected to meet for the first time in the course of the term of office of my successor.

Japan

The 2005 EU-Japan Year provided the occasion for me to establish closer contacts with organised civil society in this state, which is a key EU trading partner. This led to a request from the European Commission to the EESC to draw up an exploratory opinion.

3. WORKING ARRANGEMENTS AND METHODS

In order to enable the EESC to deliver work which is relevant, both as regards subject matter and timing, it was also essential to modernise its working methods.

***Electronic media –
simplification and
modernisation***

The general secretariat accepted my proposal and took important steps with a view to networking internal and external communications by stepping up the use of electronic media. Electronic newsletters and a completely revised EESC website also revitalised access to information. I was particularly pleased by the project involving the joint designing, with our Indian partners, of the website of the EU-India Round Table.

***Setting priorities
and using resources***

With a view to simplifying internal procedures, during my term of office an internal working party was set up under the personal chairmanship of the secretary-general; this working party put forward key proposals for modernising everyday working procedures at the EESC and making optimum use of such procedures.

It was, however, not just the technical requirements which had to be put in place for making the work of the Committee more effective; the political prerequisites also had to be established. The diagnosis was clear: opinions which were no longer topical had a bad effect on the Committee's image. A blueprint for the necessary therapy had already been mapped out: properly targeted use had to be made of existing resources by focusing on fundamental issues.

Basic changes

Although the above analysis was supported by many colleagues, taking action along these lines was not an easy task. I was, however, eventually able to achieve two important breakthroughs which will, to a decisive degree, make it easier to focus on fundamental issues in future.

***Decision taken by the
EESC Bureau to simplify
and streamline procedures***

First of all, the Bureau adopted the report of the Ad-hoc working party on working methods (*The Wilkinson Report*) and took a number of key implementing decisions. The measures taken included the binding standardisation of the format and maximum length of opinions. Section bureaux were also given a stronger role in determining which issues were to be regarded as important.

***Change to the Rules of
Procedure***

The requisite change to the Rules of Procedure rounded off the measures which needed to be taken to make it possible to streamline the work of the EESC. Regrettably, I was unable to introduce what I regarded as the most straightforward and effective measure, namely the possibility of simply not issuing an opinion on issues in respect of which the EESC was unable to provide any added value. The increased use of the procedure involving rapporteurs working without a study group is, however, an important step in the right direction: using this procedure, opinions which provide no special added value can thus be addressed under a simplified procedure.

A clear path has been created

At the end of my term of office, this package of important changes in working arrangements and methods has provided the EESC with the wherewithal to keep up with the issues of the day. What is now required is the political will to engage in resolute priority-setting – an approach which also includes deliberately setting aside issues which are not important. There should, in future, be no excuse for drawing up opinions which are not of topical importance.

Communication strategy

Increased concentration on topical issues is also a key part of our communication strategy. This strategy, which was drawn up under the term of office of my predecessor, has been progressively implemented. Success was not long in coming; the media analyses carried out over the last two years point to the fact that the Committee's profile has been clearly raised.

Upstream and downstream stages in the legislative process

An additional component of my work programme was the idea that the Committee should further extend its activities to cover the upstream and downstream stages of the legislative processes. This idea was welcomed by the Council presidencies in connection with the *Better Legislation Initiative*. The report of September 2005 on this matter sets out the paths to be pursued by the EESC; this represents very promising new territory for the Committee.

4. RELATIONS WITH THE OTHER INSTITUTIONS AND STRATEGIC PARTNERS

The achievements of my term of office would not have been possible in the absence of partners who were ready to engage in cooperation. The development of strategic partnerships therefore constituted the third priority of my work programme.

European Commission

The first important success I was able to achieve was with regard to cooperation with the Commission:

Cooperation protocol

In November 2005 the President of the European Commission, Mr Barroso, visited the EESC to sign a new Cooperation Protocol. I subsequently had the opportunity to present this document to the press in the Berlaymont Building, together with Mrs Wallström; this joint presentation was a *première* as regards our relations with the press. The Cooperation Protocol sets out highly ambitious demands in respect of our cooperation with the European Commission and represents a real upgrading of the role of the Committee as an institutional partner.

*Exploratory opinions,
cooperation, discussions*

The text of this Cooperation Protocol was translated into action already during the course of my term of office.

The number of exploratory opinions and joint hearings increased significantly.

The direct exchange of views between the EESC and the European Commission was also clearly stepped up; in the course of my term of office, Commission President Barroso and Vice-President Wallström each participated in two of the Committee's plenary sessions, whilst other members of the Commission accepted invitations to participate in other plenary meetings and a large number of both section meetings and special events.

European Parliament

My direct contacts with the President of the European Parliament, Mr Borrell, led to several invitations to attend the EP's Conference of Committee Chairmen. In each case these meetings directly gave rise to the drawing-up by the EESC of exploratory opinions in response to requests from the European Parliament. As far as cooperation with the EP is concerned, however, there still remains a considerable amount of untapped potential. The only way to make use of this potential is by engaging in ongoing contacts in respect of the work of our two bodies; much still remains to be done in this field in the course of the term of office of my successor.

Council of the EU

In our relations with the Council the policy of priority-setting also recorded its first successes. My term of office witnessed the introduction of a new level of consultation of the EESC by the highest European decision-making body: for the first time the EESC was directly mandated to carry out work by the European Council. This first mandate, issued at the 2005 Spring Summit led to welcome follow-up requests: the mandate in respect of the Lisbon Strategy was renewed one year later and a further mandate, in respect of the sustainability strategy, followed in June 2006.

***Contacts with the Council
presidency***

My endeavours to achieve closer contacts with the Member States holding the Council presidency were also clearly beneficial. In the course of my term of office, all of the states holding the Council presidency gave me the opportunity to engage in preparatory talks with the various heads of state or government or individual members of the respective governments.

Cooperation, exploratory opinions, invitations to attend summit meetings

The holding of joint events, with active participation on the part of ministers from the respective Member States holding the Council Presidency, has become the norm. The number of exploratory opinions requested by the Council presidencies has also shot up in the course of my term of office: none of the states holding the presidency gave us less than three requests for opinions and, in the case of Austria, a total of four opinions was requested.

I was particularly pleased by the important precedents established by the invitations to the EESC president to attend official summit meetings, such as the invitations in respect of the EUROMED Summit held in Barcelona in 2005 and the EU-Latin America/Caribbean Summit held in Vienna in 2006. In the case of the tripartite meeting held in connection with the informal Social Affairs and Employment Council, held in Helsinki in 2006, the EESC was, for the first time, given the opportunity to make a detailed presentation of its standpoint.

National economic and social councils

Cooperation with the network of national economic and social councils has been strongly boosted. A prime example is the cooperation over the Lisbon Strategy in connection with the successive mandates received from the Council. This cooperation will be further intensified and the scope of the issues addressed will be extended in the course of the term of office of my successor.

Committee of the Regions

Relations with the Committee of the Regions have been decisively improved. The extending of reciprocal invitations to the respective Committee presidents to attend key events has become the norm. Together with my opposite number at the CoR, we have reached agreement on initial concrete steps towards substantive cooperation in respect of issues which are matters of priority for both committees. The cooperation agreement between the two committees, which is about to be renegotiated, will also make provision for regular contacts between the presidents of the respective committees.

European social partners

Relations between the EESC and the organisations representing the European social partners regrettably continued to be confined, above all, to cooperation over specific issues, particularly at conferences. I should like to draw attention, in particular, to the seminar held in April 2005 to mark the 20th anniversary of *Val Duchesse*; this seminar, which was the subject of considerable attention, brought together the participants at the original meeting and representatives of today's players with a view to engaging in a joint reflection on the future of the social dialogue.

European civil society organisations: Liaison Group

Cooperation between the EESC and other civil society organisations and networks progressed very satisfactorily.

What I regard, above all, as my personal "legacy" is the great variety of activity carried out by our Liaison Group for European Civil Society Organisations: special mention is even made of these activities in the cooperation protocol signed with the European Commission. This innovative partnership tool has passed its initial tests, for example in relation to cooperation with regard to joint activities in the context of the Lisbon Strategy. It is likely to be called upon to meet still greater demands in the course of the term of office of my successor.

ILO

In December 2005, I signed a cooperation protocol with the director-general of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), Mr Somavia. This protocol is designed to improve the structure of cooperation between our two bodies and to enhance the external visibility of this cooperation. The EESC and the ILO have so many common objectives that special potential for synergy exists and can be tapped.

UN/Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

In 2006 I paid a visit to the UN's ECOSOC in New York in order to propose the signing of a similar agreement to that with the ILO. I met with a positive reaction; the president of the ECOSOC, Mr Hachani, and I have since accepted reciprocal invitations to attend our respective plenary sessions. There has also been an official exchange of letters in which formal steps were taken for bringing about closer cooperation between our two bodies.

IAESCSI/AICESIS

In the course of my term of office I also clearly stepped up the involvement of the EESC with the International Association of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions (IAESCSI/AICESIS). Our increased substantive involvement was also backed up by a decision taken by the EESC Bureau to enter into negotiations on achieving for the EESC full membership of the IAESCSI with a special status.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Continuity

In the course of the last two years I have achieved the goals which I set out. In the case of the following main objectives: "Priority-setting – modern working methods- strategic partners", the successes recorded were based on the preliminary work carried out by my predecessors. This continuity is a key component of our success. This also makes it all the more important for me to hand over a "well-ordered" Committee to my successor.

Culture

One area of real innovation in the life of the EESC is , however, a matter for which I am personally responsible, namely the placing of emphasis on culture as, in the definition set out by the Committee, a "commitment to shared values". Culture, seen as a process which has a decisive influence on our everyday lives, was a central theme – and hallmark – of my term of office.

I was very pleased that colleagues and members of staff helped to organise the first initiatives in this field, such as the cultural evenings, exhibitions and concerts. A particularly fine example of the new emphasis on culture was clearly the Committee's new presentation book; this book, the production of which was a real collective undertaking involving a large number of EESC members, will serve as a new cultural visiting card for the Committee.

Core objectives

The following core objectives, set out in respect of the work of the EESC during my two-year term of office, were realised, as part of a joint effort, by implementing my work programme:

1. The EESC enhanced its credibility by being more selective as regards the work which it undertook and by virtue of the prospective analyses and opinions which it drew up.
2. The EESC became a key player in the *Communicating Europe* campaign.
3. The external visibility of the EESC was improved by carrying out the requisite public relations work and by enhancing the role of its members.
4. The EESC increased its transparency as regards the work which it carries out.

5. In its role as an institutional partner in the civil dialogue, the EESC was able to make its contribution towards the development of participatory democracy at European level.

The outcome of the endeavours to achieve the abovementioned objectives can be summed up as follows: By implementing its work programme, the Committee has been able to enhance its degree of recognition, its level of acceptance and its impact.

All of the abovementioned initiatives do, however, represent "work in progress"; proud though we may be of the achievements which have been made, there is no reason to rest on our laurels. What I shall hand over to my successor represents a good basis and important new starting points for further work. At the same time, however, my successor will also inherit the challenges deriving from my work programme which have yet to be fully resolved:

- priority-setting in respect of the selection of issues for consideration has proved its worth- this requirement must now become an ongoing principle underlying our work;
- the modernisation of the Members' Statute has been carried out in respect of certain points – work has still to be done in many other areas;
- our relations with the European Parliament can be further developed.

In the course of my two-year term of office we have been much engrossed in considering – or helping to shape – the future of Europe. Against this background, a quotation from one of the founding fathers of the European Community would appear to be apt. In May 1954 Jean Monnet pointed out: *"The only choice we have is between changes in which we will be caught up and changes which we have opted to bring about¹."*

I have sought to achieve very many such intentionally selected changes and am pleased that the Committee has gone along with me in this course of action.

The success which has been attained shows that our approach was the right one.

¹ "Nous n'avons que le choix entre les changements dans lesquels nous serons entraînés et ceux que nous aurons su vouloir et accomplir."

My warmest thanks to you all – Committee members and members of the secretariat staff alike – for your cooperation.

May I take this opportunity to wish every success and happiness to my successor and, indeed, to all of us during the term of office of the next president of the European Economic and Social Committee.
