



European Economic and Social Committee

Brussels, 22 February 2002

PLENARY ASSEMBLY

20 AND 21 FEBRUARY 2002

SUMMARY OF OPINIONS ADOPTED

Full text versions of EESC opinions are available in the 11 official languages on the Committee's website at the following address:

<http://www.esc.eu.int> ("Documents")

The Plenary of 20 and 21 February was attended by **Mr Jean-Luc Dehaene**, vice-president of the convention. Another salient point was the discussion on the follow-up to Laeken and the EESC's role.

1. **LISBON STRATEGY**

• **SUB-COMMITTEE ON A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY – SIGNALS FOR BARCELONA**

Rapporteur: **Mr Cabra de Luna** (Various interests – E)

– **Reference:** Additional own-initiative opinion – CES 193/2002

– **Key points:**

The Committee in plenary agreed on 29 November 2001 to prepare a supplementary Own-Initiative Opinion on sustainability. The Committee addresses the state of the "enlarged Lisbon strategy": it is worth recalling that this strategy sets the 10-year goal of making the European Union "the most dynamic, competitive, sustainable knowledge-based economy, enjoying full employment and strengthened economic and social cohesion". Since Lisbon (March 2000) and in particular since Gothenburg (June 2001) the Commission is entrusted with the presentation of a Synthesis Report on the progress made towards this goal; this Report is to be examined every year by the Springtime European Council, to be held this year in Barcelona on 15 March.

The Committee has examined the Commission document (ref. COM(2002) 14) and made its own assessment of the situation. In short neither the Committee nor the Commission find enough has been done and call for better decision-making, greater consistency and a real effort to inform and involve civil society in this whole process. The Barcelona European Council takes on special significance in this context for the EU needs not only to be consistent with its own declared ambitions but also to set an example which will help influence the world-wide decisions at the UN Johannesburg conference in September.

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• **Accessibility of web sites**

Rapporteur: **Mr Cabra de Luna** (Various interests – E)

– **Reference:** COM(2001) 529 final – CES 189/2002

– **Key points:**

Inaccessible public web sites discriminate against people with disabilities, whose access to their information and content is in fact restricted. In the context of the European Year of Disabled People in 2003, the Committee recommends that the draft directive should include a clause for forbidding this type of discrimination.

The Committee considers that the proposed measures to enable access to web sites could have been the object of mandatory legislation; nevertheless it recognises the approach based on voluntary commitment of public administrations at the various levels and expects the Member States to promote a comprehensive implementation of all the measures provided for in the Communication.

The Committee pledges to make its own web site accessible and user friendly so as to ensure better access to information and to public debate for all citizens with special needs. The Committee urges the Commission as well as the other EU institutions to make their own public web pages accessible through adaptation of the WAI guidelines; it also hopes that the initiative as proposed in connection with the European Year of Disabled People, will encourage the adoption of measures on the accessibility of public and private sites, particularly for e-commerce.

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2. **RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT**

• **Biotechnology**

Rapporteur: **Mr Bedossa** (Various interests – F)

- **Reference:** COM(2001) 454 final – CES 192/2002

– **Key points:**

The ESC stresses that the global dimension of biotechnology should not be obscured by the debate between developed countries and that the issue of solidarity between rich and poor countries with regard to the accepted responsibility to protect the environment must be addressed.

It is essential that the European Community play its part in this forward-looking sector by taking decisive action. Its voice will only be heard if it is a major player in the sphere of biotechnology and it is imperative that there should be greater awareness in the European Community of the implications for competitiveness, growth and job creation. Thus the various stakeholders must mount a strong and sustained effort to cooperate.

The Committee is prepared to play a role here by providing information, initiating an ongoing debate, ensuring a rational choice of objectives to promote the creation of jobs and new businesses and maintaining links with civil society.

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- **Rules for participation – 6th RTD framework programme**
Rapporteur: **Mr Malosse** (Employers – F)
- **Reference:** COM(2001) 822 final – 2001/0202 COD – CES 185/2002
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3. HEALTH AND SAFETY AT WORK

- **Asbestos-related risks at work**
Rapporteur: **Mr Etty** (Workers – NL)
- **Reference:** COM(2001) 417 final – 2001/0065 (COD) – CES 194/2002
- **Key points:**

The ban on marketing and use of asbestos by Commission Directive 1999/77/EC could have allowed for a fundamentally different improvement of the protection of workers and the self employed from the risks related to exposure to asbestos at work. The new instrument could have concentrated on measures to be taken to better protect those people who are still at risk of exposure because they have to deal with existing asbestos products in their work, such as demolition, repair, maintenance, removal and similar activities.

It could also have dealt with specific provisions for: health surveillance; registration; and information and training; the risks faced by the self-employed; the risks posed to workers (and the population in general) from the second use of products containing asbestos; and improving the recognition of asbestos related diseases as occupational diseases. These are matters which the Commission ought to address through other legal instruments if this Directive is not appropriate.

The Committee considers that the proposal contains several positive elements: simplifications, reduction of limit values for exposure, identification of asbestos before starting demolition or maintenance, proof of competence and training. The Draft Directive could be improved by

introducing greater clarity in respect of asbestos mining in the EU. The Committee thinks that mining ought to be clearly included in the marketing or first use of asbestos.

The competence requirement for firms engaged in demolition or removal work, must be made more specific. The Commission should make reference to the use of nationally-determined criteria.

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4. EXTERNAL RELATIONS

- **EU relations with Latin America and the Caribbean**

Rapporteur: **Mr Gafo Fernández** (Employers - E)

- **Reference:** Own-initiative opinion – CES 195/2002

- **Key points:**

The partnership concept must govern all aspects of relations between the two regions. It must embrace concepts such as grassroots proximity, visibility and public acceptability. From this starting point, the partnership must rest upon the creation of a genuine European and Latin American community of nations – while recognising the differences between regions and countries - which is democratic, socially just and has an efficient economy, which encompasses areas such as migration and culture, and in which civil society has a key part to play.

Each EU institution or body must play a specific role in building up this partnership. It is the task of the European Economic and Social Committee to offer the benefit of its experience in creating or reinforcing similar bodies - such as the Mercosur consultative forum - either already in existence or on the drawing-board, at sub-regional level and within the various countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Prior to the second Summit of Heads of State and Government of the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean, the second meeting of representatives of civil society organisations will be held from 17-19 April 2002 in Madrid. These meetings – the agendas for which reflect both priority points identified by civil society and the socio-economic issues to be discussed at the summit - should be put on a more official footing in future.

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5. AGRICULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

- Tobacco/Premiums

Rapporteur general: **Mr Liolios** (Various interests – EL)

– **Reference:** COM(2001) 684 final – 2001/0276 CNS – CES 190/2002

– **Key points:**

In the Commission communication A sustainable Europe for a better world: A European Union strategy for Sustainable Development (COM(2001) 264 final), it was proposed that the emphasis of EU agricultural aid should be reoriented so as to reward healthy, high quality, products and practices rather than quantity.

With this in mind the European Commission, in its proposal fixing the premiums and guarantee thresholds for leaf tobacco, has indicated that, following the 2002 review, the tobacco regime should be adjusted.

The Committee takes into account this general approach but would point out that the final review and position must be undertaken also in conjunction with the Commission's presentation of its review and proposal for raw tobacco.

Since the tobacco sector is of major regional importance for less favoured areas, and in particular provides employment for small holdings, it is vital that the European Commission in every way makes an immediate start on work to frame proposals for alternatives.

- The resources allocated to the **Community Tobacco Fund** since 1996 have not been much used up to now.
- Without the sectoral study having been duly submitted and evaluated (this is expected at the end of 2002), such comments as that in **Recital 5** of the proposal contradict the previous positions of the European Commission. For reasons of consistency Recital 5 should therefore be removed from the proposal.
- There has been considerable delay on the European Commission's part in submitting its proposal. The final decisions will, in all probability, be taken after cultivation has already started, which will undermine the work of farmers and the processing industry and seriously disrupt the functioning of the market.

The ESC asks the European Commission:

- a) to **extend** the current tobacco regime and the validity of Regulation No. 660/1999 for a further three years (2002-2004), maintaining current premium levels and the guarantee thresholds (quotas) for all variety groups. The ESC in any case recommends to the European Commission that future amendments should take effect as of 2003, and that last year's regime (2001) should be maintained for the year 2002;
- b) to **maintain** at current levels throughout the three-year period 2002-2004 the 2% deduction for premiums for the Community Tobacco Fund, as provided for in Council Regulation 1636/1998 and to continue to include agronomic research among the measures supported by the Fund.

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- **Zoonoses**

Rapporteur: Ms Davison (Various interests – UK)

- **Reference:** COM(2001) 452 final – 2001/0176-0177 COD – CES 191/2002
- **Key points:**

The ESC *strongly believes* that:

- the prevention of zoonoses should be a top priority for the EU and the Member States and that **appropriate resources** should be devoted to this end;
- it is in the common interest of all parties involved in the food chain and Public Authorities to ensure **the implementation of and compliance with high safety standards throughout the food chain**; this will also contribute to **ensuring the competitiveness of European farming at international level**, which must remain associated with high quality standards and production methods;
- the fight against **antibiotic resistance** will only be successful if comprehensive policies are adopted;
- the "new" directive must clearly indicate that **monitoring includes all sorts of domestic animal populations**;
- the collection of national reports and the preparation of synthesis reports, must be one of the **European Food Safety Authority's priorities**, along with the collection and dissemination of information on zoonoses; the Committee insists on **full transparency of reporting procedures**;

- the European Commission's draft regulation will not achieve its objectives if **Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points** principles are not implemented right through the food chain.

The ESC is concerned that the implementation dates are far too long. The Committee feels that this is not acceptable.

Finally, with respect to third country imports, **ESC demands that a strict control of the application of "Equivalent measures" be applied.**

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 - **Protection of animals - Experiments**
Rapporteur: **Mr Jaschick** (Various interests – D)
 - **Reference:** COM(2001) 703 final – 2001/0277 COD – CES 186/2002
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 - **Locust beans - Hazelnuts**
Rapporteur general: **Mr de las Heras Cabañas** (Various interests – E)
 - **Reference:** COM(2001) 667 final – 2001/0275 CNS – CES 187/2002
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