

Informal Meeting of Ministers of Employment and Social Affairs

Guimarães, 5-6 July 2007

12 key points to face the challenges ahead

Chair's conclusions, together with Germany and Slovenia, members of the Trio of Presidencies

1. The coordination of policies is one of the most important tools for European progress in employment and social issues. It enhances the improvement of policies and fosters advances towards common goals while safeguarding the flexibility, at the national level, to design strategies that are adequate to the specific contexts and policy options of Member-states.
2. Taking stock of the first ten years of the European Employment Strategy and having in mind all developments of the Open Method of Coordination, within the context of the Lisbon Strategy, is an important point of departure for our capacity to improve these instruments. The expression of the view points of Member-States, EU institutions, Social Partners and NGO's representatives has enabled us to **identify core messages** for the future.
3. First of all, and in the light of the challenges Europe faces today, it is important to strengthen and further improve **policy coordination dynamics**. It should be done through both the **clear mapping of strategic priorities**, and, on the other hand, by **increasing the efficiency of our methods** to deliver positive outcomes. **Results** are, therefore, a key word.
4. Concerning key policy areas for strategies at the European level, a number of issues have emerged from the discussions as crosscutting elements for future developments. The need to **improve the integration and visibility of social priorities** within the broader strategic framework of the reform of European economic and social models, and namely in the Integrated Guidelines of the Lisbon Strategy, has been stressed as a horizontal factor for the success of such an endeavour.
5. **Active ageing**, in the context of demographic changes, is a decisive element to foster the **sustainability of social protection systems**. It has strong links to pensions and retirement arrangements, labour markets policies and issues like lifelong learning. Such a topic also provides useful bridges between the adequacy of responses to social needs and the economic and financial perspectives on sustainability.
6. **Social inclusion** is a fundamental dimension of sustainable development strategies for Europe. It provides tools to **create opportunities for all** and to **maximize the potential** of European societies and economies. More than a matter of citizenship, it also has **positive effects** on employment, economy, skills and human development. The integration of migrants and unfavoured groups, and the **fight against poverty, especially among children** and youngsters, when life chances are generated, were mentioned as specific topics that should be a matter of more active concern. Future steps in "**active inclusion**", based on promoting **labour market integration, adequate minimum income schemes and access to quality social services**, may help build a solid and balanced framework in the field of inclusion.
7. Concerning **flexicurity**, it is essential to strike a **comprehensive and balanced approach**, with adequate mixes of **flexibility and security** as well as a balance between the different dimensions of the debate was stressed. Also, it was clear that European developments should incorporate the diversity of situations and reform strategies in Member-States. The overall challenge will be to design reform strategies that incorporate both **adaptability and security through change**, in order to meet the **needs of companies and workers** in the context of changing economies and transitional labour markets.

8. Enhancing the strategic capacity of **employment policies** is of great importance. **Employment growth** and workforce supply, the **quality of jobs**, the **conciliation of work, family and personal life**, with implications to the equality of women and men, and migration dynamics are dimensions that could be stressed in coordination processes. The prospective capacity to map potential sectors for **creation of new jobs**, and meeting the challenges of **innovation and skills** renewal in global competition were also mentioned.
9. A basic element for sustainable economic and social development is effective **investment in human potential**, through **better education and training** systems and **lifelong learning**. Both from the point of view of **competitiveness and individual resources and development**, qualification has been stressed as a cornerstone of a successful strategy to adapt Europe to meet the challenges of the 21st century. With immediate links to economic growth, employment levels, individual opportunities and social cohesion, a stronger approach to **skills** investment would be an important element to produce results in all these fronts.
10. Concerning methodological and procedural issues, a number of points have been stressed. Among them, our capacity to agree on **better common objectives**, having in mind the need to reflect the different points of departure of each country. The need to **increase the quality of indicators** available in social and employment areas and the role of **benchmarking** were also underlined. The overall goal is the improvement and strengthening of coordination in employment and social policies.
11. European processes of coordination have all to gain in **strengthening the participation of all relevant stakeholders**. This would enhance their effectiveness and mobilisation potential and therefore increase the capacity to deliver **better and more visible results for citizens**. The role of the Committees should be valued. A good example will be provided by the ongoing debate on flexicurity. Supported by the recent communication of the Commission, it will be taken forward by the Council in order to reach common principles, after receiving contributions from relevant stakeholders such as the European Parliament, the Employment and Social Protection Committees, the Social Partners.
12. The **Lisbon Agenda** has been identified as the ideal framework to implement and monitor developments in the challenges outlined above. The double goal of striking a balance between **some level of stability in the process** and the **need to improve the coherence and efficiency of our policies** should be achieved. This approach would help to design a balanced, broad and more effective framework to **maximize the potential** of the Lisbon Strategy. Among other aspects, there is room for improving the role of Committees and the **articulation between key areas as economy, education, social and employment policies**, both at the Council and Committee levels, which should also be better integrated. In this framework, the EPSSCO Council will play a leading role in **improving the employment and social dimensions of the Lisbon Strategy**.