Preparation for the European Council meeting, 19-20 March 2009

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The Council held a policy debate on the current financial and economic crisis and adopted key messages in the fields of employment and social policy, intended to be reflected in the Spring European Council Conclusions. The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council submits the following key messages to the Spring European Council:

(1) Employment and social policies in times of economic crisis:

- the economic and financial crisis is hitting hard and calls for urgent action: timely, temporary, targeted measures are necessary to stimulate employment and to prevent and limit job losses and social impacts;
- building on solidarity and allowing social protection systems to fully play their role as automatic stabiliser is key to restoring and strengthening confidence and helping pave the way for recovery. Particular attention should be given to the most vulnerable and to new risks of exclusion;
- enhanced coordination between economic, employment and social policies, taking into account the territorial dimension, is necessary;
- the crisis calls for close monitoring of both employment and social trends;
- direct responses to the crisis should be coherent with longer-term objectives and sound public finances;
- the reforms and policy mix needed to meet the long-term economic, financial, employment and social and environmental challenges of the EU should be more coherent and mutually reinforcing.

(2) Preventing and tackling unemployment while keeping labour market reforms on track:

- supporting access to employment and **easing transitions** within and into the labour market in order to shorten any spell of unemployment and to increase participation of both women and men. The common principles of flexicurity provide, in this context, useful guidance to further modernise labour markets;
- reinforcing **access to training** and active labour market measures for the unemployed, workers at risk of dismissal and other vulnerable groups. Investment to sustain open, efficient and high-quality education and training systems should help enhance skills and competences that are necessary for the future;
- **improving anticipation and matching of skills** with labour market needs so as to facilitate transitions towards new business activities generating labour demand;
- supporting employment and job creation through measures to stabilise the economy, promote the **transition towards a low carbon economy** and strengthen investment in research and development as well as in fast-growing sectors;
- **avoiding measures that induce premature withdrawal from the labour force**, such as early retirement schemes or age barriers to training opportunities, so that participation in the labour market is retained and increased.

(3) Strengthened commitment to the social inclusion and social protection objectives:

- pursuing **poverty reduction** and social cohesion, through reinforced comprehensive strategies to combat and prevent poverty and social exclusion of children, the emergence of new groups at risk of exclusion such as the young, and new risk situations, including over-indebtedness;
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- sustained efforts should **tackle homelessness**, address the multiple disadvantages facing the Roma people and their vulnerability to social exclusion, and promote the social inclusion of migrants;
- addressing long term adequacy and sustainability of **pension systems** through appropriate reforms, including inter alia the achievement of the Lisbon target of 50% employment rate of older workers and the improvement of the position of low wage earners also in the economic downturn;
- improving efficiency of **healthcare** systems and reducing health inequalities through increased attention to primary care, prevention, promotion, quality and safety, better coordination and effective use of resources including e-health;
- **delivering quality of long-term care**, to ensure healthy and dignified ageing, creating a solid financing basis, improving care coordination, including coordination between health and social care services, and ensuring the availability of skilled human resources;
- taking various actions to **support people's income** and to mitigate the direct impacts of the financial crisis on households and individuals, while investing in social and health infrastructure;
- **monitoring of social impacts of the economic crisis** and of policy measures taken or planned to cushion or limit these impacts;
- the essential role of the **Social Open Method of Coordination** could be further enhanced by mainstreaming social considerations in other policy areas through the strengthening of the social dimension of impact assessments, by devoting increased attention to the quality and continuity of stakeholder involvement and by evidence-based national target-setting, while the decision on setting national quantified targets and their definition remains a core responsibility of the Member States.