Social policy agenda: following the European Councils of Lisbon and Feira, Council of Nice, December 2000

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PRUPOSE : To present a mid-term review of the social policy agenda. CONTENT : In June 2000 the European Commission launched the "social policy agenda" for the period 2000-2005. Based on the Lisbon strategy for economic and social renewal the social policy agenda acts as a roadmap for employment and social policy. In March 2003 a conference was organised to evaluate, mid-term, the effectiveness of the social agenda and to reassess priorities for the coming years. When preparing the current assessment, the very different economic landscape the EU faces in 2003 (compared to the economic outlook of 2000 when the social policy agenda was first set) was taken into account. Attending the conference was a wide group of interested parties whose views and opinions were taken on board. Now that the social policy agenda has reached mid-point the Commission and interested parties have concluded that the priorities for the following years must be first and foremost a smooth transition from fifteen to twenty-five members in May 2004. With the average income level of the ten accession countries less than half of the average GDP per head of the current Member States there is plenty of work to be done. Other enlargement related challenges concern the discrimination faced by ethnic minorities such as the Roma. Concerning the employment rate in Europe, the Communication foresees that the average EU employment rate will be slightly reduced. To give an example, the employment rate in 2002 for the EU15 is estimated at 64.3%. That of the EU 25 would stand at 62.4% - in other words more than 7.5% below the Lisbon 2010 target. In view of these facts the Commission suggests that a key objective of the social policy agenda must be compliance with the social acquis and in particular the identification of supportive measures to do. The instrument, which will be relied upon to enact this priority, will be the European Social Fund. It will provide significant help in facilitating integration through a financial support mechanism. Further priorities will continue to be the need to create a knowledge based dynamic economy, with non-inflationary growth, more and better jobs, greater social cohesion and respect for the environment. These are all objectives listed by the Lisbon Council. Such an approach would undoubtedly facilitate an improvement in living standards and the overall quality of life in the EU. For the period beyond 2005 the Commission has established a High-level expert group on the future of employment and social policy. Its objectives are to ascertain the main orientations for future action in the field of social policy.