Competitiveness of the European textile and clothing industry, plan of action

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OBJECTIVE : proposing a plan of action to increase the competitiveness of the European textile and clothing industry. SUBSTANCE : In 1996, at current prices, production levels fell by 5.4% in the case of textiles and by 4.4% in the case of clothing from 1990. As a result, over the same period over 600 000 jobs were lost, 100 000 of them in 1996. The serious problems of restructuring and modernization of the European industry and the increasingly common practice of delocalization have prompted the Commission to propose a programme of action seeking to increase the competitiveness of the European textile/clothing sector. The programme consists of general strategy to meet the needs of the sector itself (the two sides of industry in collaboration with the national and Community authorities) and is scheduled over a four-year period (1997-2000). It is focused on 4 major lines of action : - employment and training: measures have been drawn up seeking to reduce the burden of tax and social security charges in this sector and with regard to the reduction/reorganization of working hours in order to restimulate employment in this sector. Concerning training, measures are being envisaged to provide the new qualifications now required of the workforce: - development and dissemination of new products, procedures and equipment: action is expected mainly in the field of new information technologies together with initiatives concerning electronic commerce. RTD is also necessary involving research into the use of new materials; - the functioning of the internal market: a number of initiatives are envisaged seeking in particular to achieve better industrial cooperation between Community companies and promote market access and protect intellectual and commercial property. A proposal concerning state aid is currently under consideration (as part of a multisectoral framework project in the Member States). Measures are also being envisaged across the board to harmonize legislation in the Member States with regard to azo dyes and pentachlorophenols (revision of Directive 76/769/EEC). At regional level measures are being envisaged under the second stage of the ADAPT programme; - access to third country markets: in this field it is necessary to promote access for European companies to third country markets and to ensure that existing trade policy rules and instruments are respected. In order to promote exports, the Commission proposes a programme of coordination and textile/clothing industry representation in third countries. The Commission is currently examining those aspects of the 'social label' concerning products from third countries and in particular the transparency, reliability and compatibility of these products with the rules of international trade. It is considering the possibility of proposing a code of conduct among European firms and consumers so as to achieve greater awareness of the issues involved throughout the sector.