Social policy agenda for the period 2006-2010

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The Council held a policy debate on a new Social Policy Agenda, on the basis of a note prepared by the Presidency, identifying six possible specific areas for priority action, the so-called A-C-T-I-O-N approach:

• Activation: more and better jobs would require the activation of Europe's unused labour potential. A more dynamic and inclusive labour market, with increased mobility in all dimensions, can support a net increase in labour market participation.

• Commitment: commitment to delivery from actors at all relevant levels.

• Training: investment in human capital to increase the skills of the workforce and productivity in the workplace.

• Inclusion: modernised and sustainable social protection systems that guarantee inclusion of the most vulnerable groups.

• Organisation of work: increase the adaptability of companies and workers in order better to reflect the divergent needs and preferences in society.

• Non-discrimination: equal opportunities for all to participate fully in all aspects of life and to have access to work and services.

At the end of the debate, the President of the Council concluded that:

– delegations recognised that this is time for ACTION; in this context, there is room to improve the communication of the Lisbon objectives to citizens;

– the objectives of the Lisbon strategy should remain unchanged and the new Social Policy Agenda should support the implementation of the Lisbon goals and targets;

– the balance between the economic/growth, employment and social policy dimensions is a key element of the Lisbon strategy, in view of their mutually reinforcing nature;

– the 6 areas suggested by the Presidency were broadly supported by delegations. Concerning "activation", a reference was made to the need to keep older workers in the labour market as well as to favour the integration of disadvantaged young people (in this context, the initiative for a youth pact suggested by the French, Swedish, Spanish and German delegations in a letter to the President of the Autumn European Council 2004 was particularly welcomed). Delegations also referred to the need to reconcile professional and family life (better care infrastructures for children and the elderly would improve participation in economic life).

Other issues referred to during the debate concerned:

– the need to involve all stakeholders in the process of pursuing the Lisbon objectives, with special reference to the dialogue with the social partners;

– the need better to use the tools available and in particular the open method of coordination and the Structural Funds.

The Council further endorsed a joint opinion of the Employment and Social Protection Committees concerning the report ("Kok Report") of the High Level Group advising the European Commission on its preparations for the mid-term review of the Lisbon strategy in March 2005.

It is expected that the Commission will soon present communications concerning the mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy as well as a new Social Policy Agenda, that are due to be agreed by the 2005 Spring European Council.

Since the Maastricht informal Council, the aim of the Presidency has been to lay the ground work for these decisions by promoting a broad debate on the priorities to be addressed by the forthcoming Social Agenda in the context of the renewed impetus to be given to the Lisbon Strategy. This has been the subject of a number of conferences18, the outcome of which have been reported on by the Presidency.