

Informal Meeting of Ministers for Employment and Social Affairs

12 – 13 July 2012, Nicosia, Cyprus

Discussion Note for Workshop 3

Strengthening the involvement of the social partners and non-governmental organisations throughout the European Semester process.

Chair: Mrs Sotiroula Charalambous, Minister of Labour and Social insurance, CYPRUS

The European Semester is a tool that the European Union needs in order to support the European Economic Governance process. During the implementation of the second European Semester various complications were observed. Considering the recent discussions in the EPSCO Council of June 2012, it is clear that the process should be further examined in order to effectively monitor progress towards the Europe 2020 Strategy goals for a smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

The success of the Europe 2020 Strategy depends on the involvement of all sections of society. It is widely acknowledged that civil society has a key role to play not only at the European level in the monitoring of the implementation of the strategy and throughout the process of the European Semester but also at national level, in the formulation and implementation of the National Reform Programmes. Their contribution is instrumental in bringing the European priorities closer to the people and strengthening the feeling of ownership of the targets of the Strategy.

The Strategy itself highlights the need to enhance the contribution of stakeholders at national and regional level as well as that of the social partners.

The role of the social partners is clearly acknowledged through the Lisbon Treaty as the Treaty also confirms the importance of social dialogue and of the consultation of social partners. The Lisbon Treaty also opens up significant prospects for establishing a genuine civil dialogue at European level between organised civil society and the EU institutions.

Furthermore the Spring European Councils of 2011 and 2012, recognised the role of all stakeholders in the implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy.

The European Semester process starts with the Annual Growth Survey issued by the Commission late November and ends with the adoption by the Council in June (early July) of the country-specific recommendations that the European Commission prepares based on its evaluation of the National Reform Programmes.

As regards matters related to employment policy the Employment Committee meets the social partners bi annually during the semester cycle. The first time is after the Annual Growth Survey is presented and the draft Joint Employment Report is prepared, in order to get their views. The second time is after the National Reform Programmes are submitted and before the negotiation of the country-specific recommendations.

Similarly, the social partners have the opportunity to express their views on macroeconomic issues through the Macro-economic Dialogue (MED) that is a high level forum for the exchange of views between the Council, Commission, European Central Bank and social partners on issues related to wage developments, monetary, fiscal and structural policies.

The Employment Package, presented by the Commission in April 2012¹, underlines the importance of governance and includes specific proposals to strengthen the involvement of the EU social partners in the European Semester by establishing their effective involvement on the main strategic priorities in the area of employment policies and by setting up an EU tripartite format for monitoring and exchange views on wage developments in relation to productivity, inflation and internal demand, unemployment and income inequalities.

It should be noted that the European Economic and Social Committee plays an active role in driving the participation of national social partners and civil society in the practical implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy. Similarly, the European Committee of the Regions helps to mobilise regional and local authorities in contributing to the implementation of the Strategy.

There are various aspects to be considered as regards the involvement of the social partners and non-governmental organisations in the European Semester process. While there is a relatively good involvement of the social partners at national level, it seems that the involvement of civil society and non-governmental organisations needs to be improved and become more visible. There is also the question of timing, i.e. the involvement of stakeholders starts after the adoption by the Commission of the Annual Growth Survey and after the priorities of the year have been set. Involving them from the very beginning of the Semester could increase their ownership of the Strategy which is crucial in achieving the Europe 2020 targets. Mapping out their exact role in the European Semester both at national and

¹ Communication “Towards a Job Rich Recovery”, COM(2012), 173 final



European level may enable them to be more proactive and support them in their effort to contribute more actively in the implementation of the Strategy.

Questions:

1. What is your experience from the implementation of the European semester process so far? Do you have suggestions on how to improve the process?
2. How would you evaluate the participation of the social partners and non-governmental organisations in the European semester process so far? In your opinion, does their involvement need to be further reinforced and how?
3. How can EPSCO, the Commission and the Employment and Social Protection Committees contribute towards this?

Annex:

The European Semester

The European semester is an EU level policy coordination tool which is part of the broader EU aim to strengthen economic governance. The annual European Semester is a process composed of two phases, the Spring European Council meeting marking the end of the first phase of the semester cycle and the beginning of the second phase.

Key Stages:

First Phase

- In December (or late November) the Commission issues its Annual Growth Survey (AGS) which sets out EU priorities for the coming year to boost growth and job creation.
- Various Council formations study the AGS and draw conclusions
- The Spring European Council adopts EU guidance on the basis of the AGS and Council input

Second Phase

- In April Member States submit their National Reform Programmes and Stability or Convergence Programmes
- In May the Commission evaluates the Programmes and prepares country-specific recommendations
- In June the European Council debates and endorses the country-specific recommendations and the Council formally adopts them.