



2nd Advisory Group Meeting
Brussels, 14 February 2005

Brief Overview

In preparation of the 9th Regional Meeting of the ISC, to be held in Luxembourg on 24, 25 February 2005, the 2nd Advisory Group meeting of the Social Cohesion Initiative was held under the chairmanship of Mrs. Miet Smet, Co-chair of the ISC, Member of the Flemish Parliament and former Belgian Minister of Labour and Employment. All the five ISC sectors were represented.

A comprehensive presentation on the conclusions of the Working Table II and Regional Meetings of the Stability Pact, held in November 2004, in Skopje, was followed by the sectoral presentation of the ISC Action Plan 2005 with particular attention to specific strategies and bottlenecks.

Other items of the agenda focused on the preparatory work of the upcoming 9th ISC Regional Meeting. To facilitate the reporting and monitoring of social programmes in SEE a discussion was held on the identification of useful indicators and the collection of statistical data.

Introductory Remarks

In her introduction Mrs. Smet (MS) welcomed the participants and began by comparing the results achieved by the ISC group with the conclusions outlined in the report of the first Advisory Group Meeting held in September last year. A few outstanding issues still remain to be tackled, such as the identification of evaluation criteria, indicators and modality for data collection to be used for the overall ISC evaluation, as well as the assessment of the actual or potential impact on employment deriving from other WT II or SP activities and the impact of current SEE government policy. An initial overview of contact points in the academic field yet remains to be compiled. Sector leaders were asked to provide the information on the existing contact points. Meetings with Mr. Spidla European Commissioner for DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunity, and Mr. Kyprianou, European Commissioner for DG Health and Consumers Protection, should shortly take place.

Proceedings of the Meeting

The conclusions of the Working Table II and Regional Meetings of the Stability Pact, Skopje, November 2005

MS reported on the WT II and Regional SP Meeting held in November 2004 in Skopje. She informed on the overall positive change of attitude regarding the importance of social policy development. There is indeed an increased interest both within the SEE representatives and the international community concerning social policy development issues. She referred to employment, one of the ISC sectors, being now, alongside trade and investment a SP core objective. MS also highlighted that Social Dialogue is clearly linked with employment policy and therefore, through this clustering exercise, the efforts in upgrading the ISC within the SP are bearing fruits. MS showed confidence that the importance of health policy would be acknowledged in the coming future. In fact economic growth calls for a healthy population and the health sector,

having developed activities in seven sub-sectors and having delivered tangible results, deserves this recognition. Conscious that WT II is primarily oriented towards economic policy issues, MS felt that upgrading the ISC, even at the level of specific sectoral activities, would not be an easy task.

The Norwegian representative, Ambassador Gislesen, supported the Chairperson's statement but also highlighted that if certain activities within the SP were genuinely successful and result oriented, they would in the end obtain their deserved recognition.

The CEB also confirmed the growing interest with regard to social policy developments and mentioned that, at a recent meeting on education, social cohesion was deemed an important component for societies in transition. Michelle Meunier referred also to the renewed interest in the European Commission for the Lisbon Agenda which indeed stresses the impact of employment policies and social cohesion on global competitiveness.

The Greek representative argued that it was difficult to separate the various ISC sectors. There existed inter sectoral links across the five areas of interest of the Initiative and beyond. Dr. Constantopoulos referred to a recent Ministerial conference on health, in which the links were also underlined with agricultural and economic development.

Bernard Snoy, (BS) Director of Working Table II, paid tribute to the Chairperson's contribution, stressing that she had been instrumental in advancing social policy in the SP agenda. He particularly referred to MS's presentation delivered at the WT II regional meeting in Skopje. He also praised the work of the ISC chairmanship in general. BS supported the views expressed by the Chair and added that this increased interest regarding social policy development was also apparent within the SP management. This was reflected in the conclusions of the latest SP Regional Meeting in Skopje and confirmed by the fact that at the next WT II Regional Meeting planned for the 17th May 2005 in Sofia, health policy, along with infrastructures would be one of the thematic discussions. BS elaborated on the philosophy underlying the setting of the core objectives within the WTII and the SP and the reasons why it had not been possible so far to declare the ISC, with its five sectors, a core objective. The process of defining the core objectives was influenced mainly by the EC, especially DG Relex. Shortly after the nomination of Dr. Erhard Busek as the SP Special Co-ordinator each Working Table of the SP had been obliged to define at a maximum two core objectives, on which it could deliver within a defined time framework concrete results. BS insisted that the actual acknowledgment of the good work of the Initiative should be considered already a satisfactory result as originally, he had encountered substantial difficulties in convincing the EC officials, amongst others, of the advantage of regional co-operation in the field of social policy development.

Paul Peter representing the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation introduced his intervention by saying that in the SEE region success stories and concrete results, in this field could be achieved only on a long term basis. In this context he referred to some good results obtained in the field of Social Dialogue in Bulgaria. With regard to the ISC becoming a core objective of the SP, he insisted that attempts should continue in this direction. Social cohesion was in fact an indicator of success in the SEE transition process. The concept of social inclusion was needed particularly in societies where several vulnerable groups were present.

The CoE also insisted that advantage should be taken of the upgrade efforts at the sectoral level to bring the ISC closer to an SP core objective.

The Chair concluded by saying that activities throughout the five ISC sectors were necessary and most importantly that good results were obtained through the sectoral work. However, a comprehensive perspective in the SEE region should be maintained.

This would allow monitoring and better understanding the political development which might change the priorities setting on national and regional basis. MS noted that, while Bulgaria would almost certainly obtain full EU membership in 2007, Romania might encounter a delay if it would not take more energetic action to fight corruption. There were good possibilities that Croatia would obtain the EU membership in 2009.

BS added that it would also be important to monitor developments in Kosovo/UNMIK as well as observe how the situation in BiH, which marked the 10th anniversary of the Dayton Agreement, would evolve.

Presentations of the ISC Action Plan 2005 in the five sectors, including latest updates

Sectoral presentations concerning the reporting period since November 2004, were delivered by the sector leaders. The presentations included the identification of bottlenecks and outlined the strategies being developed. The highlights included the launching of three new regional projects in the health sector, namely on Tobacco Control, Blood Safety and Information Centres; the efforts to brief the Social Partners on the negotiations regarding the establishment of the Energy Community in SEE ; the opening of the Centre on Co-ordination of Social Policy Issues in Skopje. For additional details, see the annex: ISC Action Plan 2005 Update –November 2004 to February 2005 -.

Preparation of the 9th Regional ISC Meeting

a) Agenda outline

The Agenda of the 9th ISC Regional meeting was amended in accordance with the suggestions of the AG members. Amongst other things, it was decided that some thematic discussions should be included. Unanimously it was agreed that given the need to strengthen the activities in the sectors of social dialogue and social protection, relevant actors in this field, preferably coming from the SEE region, should be invited to present their experience. A slot should also be reserved to the presentation of the cross sectoral project on Occupational Health and Safety. Finally, some clearer indications on the financing needs at the sectoral level should be provided. This would allow the donors to obtain an overview of funding gaps to better decide on their financial interventions

b) Participation of SEE representatives

The Advisory Group felt that proposed list of SEE representatives invited to the meeting had been well composed as all the ISC sectors and all the eight countries beneficiary of the SP were adequately represented. The selection procedure managed by the sectors leaders in close consultation with the ministries concerned and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs proved to be efficient. Unanimously it was said that the SEE representatives should play a greater role in the discussions in the plenary session. The ISC donors agreed that also with regard to fund raising SEE partners should be more proactive as this would also demonstrate regional ownership.

c) Data analysis and indicators for the social field in SEE

Regarding the proper monitoring and evaluation in the area of social policy, it was noted by the different partners that identifying relevant data and parameters or indicators, to evaluate both the results achieved within the ISC framework, i.e. the impact of improved government policy in SEE, and the impact of other WT II/SP activities such as regional co-operation in the areas of Trade, Investment climate, Infrastructure and Energy, etc., on the employment situation and other social trends, was a difficult and time-consuming task. There were difficulties on the collection of data

as the national statistics were not updated, translation was often unavailable and the methodology used differed from country to country. Additionally, there were several available sources within the IOs and the IFIs, presenting estimations which were not always consistent, and a thorough compilation would be a long and complex exercise. Other partners, such as the representative of the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation, also objected that a data compilation without an accurate analysis would not be useful for the ISC purposes. The CEB delegation presented their experience in this matter and stressed their difficulties in a similar exercise of collecting data for the sectors relevant to the Bank. Nevertheless, the CEB agreed to provide at the next WT II Regional meeting, scheduled for the 17th and 18th May 2005 in Sofia, a compilation of relevant data to the field of social policy. The Chair concluded that this would be a first significant step towards an possible more comprehensive data analysis to be conducted on the basis of these preliminary findings.

Regional Meeting in December 2005

It was confirmed that the Austrian government has pledged to host and to finance the ISC Regional meeting to be held by the end of 2005 in conjunction with the Austrian EU Presidency (first half of 2006)

Conclusions

- As contribution to the 9th ISC Regional Meeting, the sectors will provide background documents and update.
- Meetings will have to be organised with Mr. Spidla and Mr. Kyprianou. They should be briefed amongst others, on the project: Occupational Health and Safety.
- With regard to data collection, the CEB will compile a paper including relevant data and statistics in the social sectors covered by the ISC. A document will be available and presented at the next WT II / SP Regional Meetings on 17th and 18th May 2005 in Sofia.
- New efforts will be made to promote the activities of the ISC with the SP National Co-ordinators.
- Further discussions between the ISC Co-chairmanship and the Greek government will identify the most appropriate event to be financed in conjunction with the Greek Presidency of the SEECF April 2005 – April 2006.
- ISC Co-chairmanship to write a letter to the Greek government to solicit the disbursement of a 700.000 EURO pledge to the ISC Health sector.
- An initial overview of networks and contact points in the academic field should be compiled drawing first from information provided by the sectors.