



European Economic and Social Committee

SOC/389
European Year for Active
Ageing (2012)

Brussels, 21 October 2010

OPINION

of the
European Economic and Social Committee
on the
Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Year
for Active Ageing (2012)
COM(2010) 462 final

Rapporteur: **Renate Heinisch**
Co-rapporteur: **José Isaías Rodríguez García-Caro**

On 7 September 2010 the Council and the European Parliament decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, on the

*Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on
the European Year for Active Ageing (2012)*
COM (2010) 462 final.

On 14 September 2010 the Bureau of the European Economic and Social Committee instructed the Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship to prepare the Committee's work on the subject.

Given the urgent nature of the work, at its 466th plenary session, held on 21 October 2010, the European Economic and Social Committee appointed Ms Renate Heinisch rapporteur-general and Mr José Isaías Rodríguez García-Caro co-rapporteur-general, and unanimously adopted this opinion.

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1. **Conclusions**

- 1.1 The EESC welcomes the proposal to designate 2012 the European Year for Active Ageing. However, this title and the idea behind it do not convey what the EESC thinks this year should be about, namely that ageing should not only be active, but also healthy, dignified and enjoyable. Hence, "active" ageing should not be seen just as the possibility of prolonging working life or social involvement. The Commission is therefore asked to word a less restrictive title that incorporates these broader quality-of-life dimensions.
- 1.2 European years as they have so far been constituted and implemented cannot be an entirely satisfactory model. The various events and initiatives must be even more visible and more effectively organised.
- 1.3 As it stands, the Commission's proposal provides for no clear coordination at European Union level. Yet, coordination by a central and responsible body is vital to ensure that the initiative makes its mark and has a lasting effect.
- 1.4 Central coordination is also needed for putting together a budget and allocating resources. The EESC would like to see a tangible budget framework here.

- 1.5 If the European Year 2012 is to deliver benefits, the terms "ageing", "active", healthy" and "dignified" need to be harmonised across Europe. Measures that are comparable can only be introduced if there is a common understanding of what these principles mean.
- 1.6 The EESC welcomes the involvement of the European Parliament, the Member States, the EESC and the Committee of the Regions, as set out in Article 5. The EESC sees itself as being especially fitted to playing a leading role when it comes to awareness-raising measures and steering constructive debates between social partners and organised civil society and passing on the outcomes of these. In particular, the Committee has in mind the creation of an observatory to assess events at European and national level, thereby supporting a "European Alliance for Active Ageing", which has also been proposed and which should be tasked with coordinating initiatives at Union level. The EESC could also take on the role of an "Ambassador for the Year". It would also be useful to hold a conference on the most important substantive aspects of the year, the conclusions of which should be incorporated into an own-initiative opinion drafted by the observatory.

2. **General remarks**

- 2.1 The challenges thrown up by the demographic change facing the Member States have been under discussion for a number of years now in both the European Commission and the EESC. Key topics have included: solidarity between generations, older workers, healthcare, care of the elderly and long-term care, violence against older people, lifelong learning, the needs of older people and the effects of the ageing population on health and social systems¹.
- 2.2 The proposal to make 2012 the European Year for Active Ageing was made to follow up on the goals of the most recent Council presidencies, the Europe 2020 strategy and the European Years 2010 (European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion) and 2011 (European Year of Volunteering). The EESC agrees that "for active ageing" is an effective short title for the year and that it implicitly includes the principle of "solidarity between generations". Nevertheless, the short title does not encompass the multiplicity of topics addressed.
- 2.3 "Active ageing" is defined by the World Health Organisation as "the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age"². This definition makes it clear that the main way to promote active ageing is by ensuring that people remain healthy and independent as they get older. Opportunities for participation of older people can then be increased a) on the labour market, through improved working conditions, and b) in society, through the dismantling of forms of social exclusion and through voluntary work. At the same time, active ageing is inconceivable without a minimum degree of security. For this reason, the EESC is convinced that a title such as "European Year for active, healthy and dignified ageing" would convey much more.

¹ See the list of opinions at: http://www.eesc.europa.eu/sections/soc/index_en.asp.

² World Health Organisation (2002): *Active Ageing - A Policy Framework*, p. 12.

- 2.4 In the course of drafting the opinions referred to above³, the EESC always involved the relevant DG in its discussions. It therefore welcomes the fact that, for the year 2012 too, the Commission is also planning to let all the relevant DGs, with their corresponding structural and financial resources, take part. It is important that this be done in a coordinated manner.
- 2.5 In this connection, the EESC welcomes the fact that the subject of the European Year 2012 will be discussed further in both the Healthy Ageing: Consumer Empowerment for Active Ageing⁴ workshop and during the Third European Demography Forum⁵.
- 2.6 The EESC also welcomes the envisaged three-year timeframe (2011 to beginning of 2014). This extended period will help to entrench the subject in all important policy areas.
- 2.7 It further welcomes the thematic priorities *named* in the proposal. Necessary additions to the content will be set out when discussing Article 3.3 – Content of measures.

3. **Specific remarks**

3.1 **On Article 1 – *Subject***

- 3.1.1 For a long time, public discussion of demographic change saw population ageing as a burden on society generally and on the social and health systems in particular. This negative view is beginning gradually to change. The potential of older people is increasingly coming to the fore and the opportunities afforded by an ageing society given greater prominence.
- 3.1.2 However, the positive aspects that demographic change brings with it can only benefit both ageing people themselves and society as a whole if people have the opportunity to age in good health and security. Only in this way can they actively make the most of their potential and make a contribution in terms of intergenerational solidarity. Only the kind of title suggested in point 2.3 would accommodate these prerequisites.
- 3.1.3 If the European Year 2012 is to deliver benefits, the terms "ageing", "active", "healthy" and "dignified" need to be harmonised across Europe. Measures that are comparable can only be introduced if there is a common understanding of what these principles mean.

3.2 **On Article 2 – *Objectives***

- 3.2.1 "Active" ageing should not be understood merely as an opportunity to prolong working life or participation in society through voluntary unpaid activities. Rather, it should be about recognising and valuing the very diverse contributions that older people make to society and avoiding social exclusion. Among these contributions are the financial and or/social support given to younger members of the family, caring for partners and friends, spiritual and artistic

³ See point 2.1 and footnote 1.

⁴ Healthy Ageing: Consumer Empowerment for Active Ageing, 18.10.2010.

⁵ Third Demography Forum, 22-23.11.2010.

creativity and innovation, handing down experience and values, and much more. All of these things are possible even with a certain degree of health and other impairment. Such constraints only make these contributions all the more laudable.

3.2.2 In this connection, the Committee welcomes and endorses the objectives set out by the Commission, namely: 1) creating better working conditions for older workers, 2) promoting social commitment, and 3) supporting healthy ageing. It thinks, however, that a further objective should be included: that of ageing in security and dignity.

3.2.3 The EESC also thinks that the measures planned to attain these goals are the right ones. What would be desirable is a targeted sequence of:

- awareness-raising,
- encouraging cooperation and synergies between Member States, and
- creating a framework for commitment and concrete action.

3.3 **On Article 2 – *Content of measures***

3.3.1 The EESC thinks the measures set out in Article 3 of the proposal are sound. However, they are too broadly worded, framed in similar terms to previous European years and could equally well grace any other campaign. They should be capable of winning over the public and not be just for the initiated. Incorporating some of the proposals from the recent consultation could ensure a greater public impact. In addition, the EESC proposes bringing the following issues, covered in earlier opinions, into the broader discussion:

3.3.1.1 Far-reaching measures and improvements are needed to enable older people to **take part longer in working life**⁶.

3.3.1.2 To both facilitate and value wide-ranging voluntary and unremunerated contributions that older people make to society as a whole and the younger generations: creation and harmonisation of an EU-wide legal category of **voluntary work**, recognition and training for voluntary activities⁷, and general definitions of this "work" so that it does not adversely affect the chances of younger people in the job market.

3.3.1.3 To maintain older people's potential for being active: reinforcing **preventive healthcare, health promotion and health education** in all age groups⁸.

⁶ See, for example, EESC own-initiative opinion of 25.3.2009 on The situation of ageing workers faced with industrial change – providing support and managing age diversity in sectors and companies, rapporteur: Mr Krzaklewski (OJ C 228, 22.9.2009, p. 24).

⁷ See, for example, EESC opinion of 13.12.2006 on Voluntary activity: its role in European society and its impact, rapporteur: Ms Koller, co-rapporteur: Gräfin zu Eulenburg, (OJ C 325, 30.12.2006, p. 46).

⁸ See, for example, EESC exploratory opinion of 15.7.2010 on Dealing with the impact of an ageing population on healthcare and welfare systems, rapporteur: Ms Heinisch (OJ...).

- 3.3.1.4 Strenuous efforts need to be made to **open the system of formal education** to older people in order to support their continuing education and social inclusion. This should also include the access of older people from all social groups to **new ICTs** (e.g., through the EU's "Ageing well in the information society" programme⁹.
- 3.3.1.5 The fact that demographic change also provides opportunities should not be overlooked. This includes, for example, new **careers and jobs** in care provision and the coordination of various trades, policy consultancy, and so on. As a new **consumer group**, older people provide another opportunity for the economy in areas such as "Design for All", Ambient Assisted Living (AAL), and consumer advice. Consumers and their rights also need to be strengthened¹⁰.
- 3.3.1.6 Measures in all the areas mentioned require a **more egalitarian approach** that addresses all parts of the population to the same degree: men and women, the healthy and the handicapped, immigrants and the native population. Those living in poverty must be given particular attention¹¹.
- 3.3.2 A number of strategies and initiatives are needed to achieve the objectives in the proposed areas:
- 3.3.2.1 An ongoing **awareness-raising campaign** focusing on the potential of older people, valuing them more highly and encouraging them to play an active civic role at local, regional and national level. This includes media drives to make more people aware of this new way of looking at ageing.
- 3.3.2.2 Promoting of **European projects**, such as "Transage", the European LILL (Learning in Later Life) network, in order to enable older people from different European countries to meet, share experience and to raise awareness of lifelong learning (including "Learning for a long life").
- 3.3.2.3 Support for projects to **bring generations together**, such as developing intergenerational networks and centres, living history circles and the "European Film Festival of the Generations" so that people have the opportunity to learn from one another, to join together and combat the isolation of older people.
- 3.3.2.4 It is particularly important here to take account of regional and local differences. Activities at local level have proven particularly effective.

⁹ See, for example, EESC opinion of 13.3.2008 on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Action Plan on adult learning – It is always a good time to learn, rapporteur Ms Heinisch, co-rapporteurs Ms Le Nouail Marlière and Mr Rodríguez García-Caro (OJ C 204, 9.8.2008, p. 89).

¹⁰ See the opinions listed in footnote 8.

¹¹ In 2008, 19% of older people (65 and upwards) in the EU 27 were at risk of poverty. See: http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/living_conditions_and_social_protection/data/database.

3.4 **On Article 4 – Coordination with the Member States**

3.4.1 The prompt appointment of national coordinators (by March 2011 at the latest) is absolutely crucial to ensure adequate coordination of national activities. Each Member State has to ensure that the national coordination centre brings on board a broad spectrum of stakeholders at national, regional and local level as well as smaller organisations and players and informs these about submitting applications, the procedures and funding opportunities.

3.5 **On Article 5 – Coordination at Union level**

3.5.1 The EESC acknowledges the Commission's coordination activities at EU level referred to in this article. It is concerned, however, that in the Commission's proposal as it stands there is no visible coordination of the various DGs and at EU level. Coordination by a central and responsible body is vital to ensure the initiative makes its mark and has a lasting effect.

3.5.2 In addition, the following measures are also considered necessary:

3.5.2.1 The creation of the **European Alliance for Active Ageing**¹² already proposed by the EESC and based on the European Alliance for the Family, in order to entrench the issue of "active, healthy and dignified ageing" in all policy areas and to ensure the coordination of measures after 2012.

3.5.2.2 The planning of budget resources to implement the measures set out, since the EESC thinks that financing based on existing funds and programmes is problematic and possibly insufficient. Funds of six million EUR were made available for the European Year of Volunteering (2011) and 17 million EUR for the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (2010). The year 2012 should also have an adequate budget. Given the economic crisis, the EESC agrees that the resources from existing programmes should be used to the full. In this case, however, it must be made clear on what scale and for which projects resources from the proposed funds and programmes are made available and how they are coordinated.

3.5.2.3 As the "bridge between the European institutions and organised civil society", the EESC is ready to play an important role in the 2012 year. This could take the form, in particular, of an observatory to assess events at European and national level and thereby support the proposed European Alliance for Active Ageing. The EESC could also take on the role of an "Ambassador for the Year". It would also be useful to hold a conference on the most important substantive aspects of the year, the conclusions of which should be incorporated in an own-initiative opinion.

¹² See the opinions listed in footnote 8.

3.6 **On Article 6 – *Consistency and complementarity***

3.6.1 As a theme, active, healthy and dignified ageing must follow up on the European years that precede it – 2010 and 2011 – and be seen in this broader perspective, since both combating poverty and supporting voluntary activity are directly linked with active, healthy and dignified ageing.

3.7 **On Article 7 – *Evaluation***

3.7.1 The drafting of a report – for the beginning of 2014 at the latest – evaluating the European Year is expressly welcomed. For this – as for other programmes – procedures need to be developed to bring to an end measures that have proved ineffective.

Brussels, 21 October 2010.

The President
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

Staffan Nilsson
