

COM5-015

Brussels, 4 May 2000

OPINION

of the

Committee of the Regions

of 12 April 2000

on the

Communication from the Commission

A concerted strategy for modernising social protection

COM(1999) 347 final

The Committee of the Regions,

HAVING REGARD TO the Communication from the Commission "A concerted strategy for modernising social protection" (COM(1999)347 final);

HAVING REGARD TO the decision by the Commission on 19 July 1999, acting under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to consult the Committee of the Regions on the matter;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision taken by its Bureau on 2 June 1999 to direct Commission 5 (Social policy, public health, consumer protection, research and tourism) to prepare the opinion on this subject;

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion (CdR 277/98 fin)¹ on the Communication from the Commission on the Social Action Programme 1998-2000;

HAVING REGARD TO the conclusions of the Council meeting on 17 December on the strengthening of cooperation for modernising and improving social protection²;

HAVING REGARD TO the Commission's Work Programme 2000 (COM(2000)155 final);

HAVING REGARD TO the Portuguese Presidency's Work Programme;

HAVING REGARD TO the draft opinion (CdR 481/99 rev. 2) adopted by its Commission 5 on 6 March 2000 (rapporteur: **Mrs Buron** (F/PSE));

WHEREAS the European Union must ensure that economic development and social development go hand-in-hand and hence a comprehensive, coordinated approach to economic policy, employment policy and social development is a key prerequisite;

WHEREAS the European social model has to face up to many challenges and will have to be modernised, without undermining the level of social protection but, on the contrary, striving for an inclusive society.

adopted the following opinion at its 33rd plenary session, held on 12 and 13 April 2000 (meeting of 12 April).

The Committee of the Regions

1. Stresses the importance of the process set in motion by the **Council Recommendation on the Convergence of Social Protection Objectives and Policies (1992)** and draws attention to its active participation at various stages in this process, in particular the European social policy forums;
2. Accordingly welcomes the **Commission's Communication**, which is a milestone in this process;
3. Appreciates the Council's commitment to such cooperation by regarding it as "a coherent action, parallel to and interactive with the European employment strategy as well as to macroeconomic dialogue";
4. Agrees with the Commission in stressing that the management and financing of social protection systems, including welfare schemes, must clearly remain the responsibility of the individual Member States but that the Union can contribute added value by framing common objectives on the basis of **exchanges of experiences** and **the identification of good practice**, in the light of a **wide-ranging public debate**;
5. Recognises the relevance of the four broad objectives proposed by the Commission and endorsed by the Council:
 - to make work pay and provide secure income,
 - to make pensions safe and pension systems sustainable,
 - to promote social integration,
 - to ensure high quality and sustainability of health care;
6. Nonetheless **insists on the key role played by the regional and local authorities** in implementing the policies designed to attain these objectives, in their capacity as
 - funders of social benefits,
 - managers of welfare services, care for the elderly and vulnerable people, and measures to combat exclusion,

- catalysts of economic activity and employment, and themselves acting as employers,
 - responsible for democratic debate among the general public,
 - administrators and coordinators of the actions or services of various bodies,
 - champions of subsidiarity,
 - champions of the role of civil society;
7. Therefore appreciates the wish expressed by the Commission and the Council to involve the Committee of the Regions in the process of cooperation for modernising and improving social protection, but calls for this principle to be translated into practice;
 8. Reiterates its request to participate in the setting up of a regional and local data base covering the main aspects of social policy with a view to identifying the role of the territorial authorities and the share of the financial costs they shoulder;
 9. Calls for the remit of the Working Group of high level officials to take account of the regional and local dimension and to draw on the territorial authorities' experiences and good practice in the sphere of social protection. In this connection, it points to the success of the Territorial Pacts in implementing the Employment Strategy;
 10. With this in mind, urges the Member States to ensure that the contribution of their respective representatives on the high level Group is based on wide-ranging consultation at national level (social partners, social security institutions and managers of welfare services, along with **organisations representing the territorial authorities** and interested NGOs);
 11. In its turn, will set up a **working group** to follow the cooperation process proposed by the Commission and the Council. This working group will be able to liaise with the high level Group and allow the Committee to play an active part on future bodies set up to coordinate social protection and in the high-level forum in June planned by the Portuguese Presidency;
 12. Further requests the Commission, when preparing the new Social Action Programme announced for 2000, to take account of the role of the territorial authorities;
 13. Lastly, views the European model as guarantee of a high level of social protection and hence part of the *acquis communautaire*; it therefore calls for the applicant countries to be involved in the process of cooperation set in motion, to enable them to assess their country's status with regard to the *acquis communautaire* which they will have to take on board.

Brussels, 12 April 2000.

The President

of the

Committee of the Regions

Jos Chabert

The Acting secretary-general

of the

Committee of the Regions

Vincenzo Falcone

¹ OJ C 93 of 6.4.1999, p.56

² OJ C 8 of 12.1.2000, p.7

--

CdR 481/99 fin F/OU/ht

CdR 481/99 fin F/OU/ht

CdR 481/99 fin F/OU/ht

CdR 481/99 fin F/OU/ht