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Consultation on EU 2020

The European Commission Working Document ‘Consultation of the Future “EU2010’ Strategy” (COM (2009)647 final) addresses several key policy issues of crucial importance for Europe in the years to come which should build the cornerstones of an EU 2020 initiative.

Some of them will be addressed below because it is believed that these should either gain more relevance and importance or tackled in an even more forward-looking way. These include the following:

(1) Demographic change and ageing:

The topic of “demographic change” and “ageing” is only briefly mentioned in the Commission Working Document and described as a threat or challenge. “The crisis has exacerbated the long-term social changes Europe faces today, such as the integration of an increasing immigrant population, social exclusion ... solidarity between generations in the context of an ageing society... In order to meet these challenges ... systems will have to be modernised so that they provide an affordable response to the future needs of our society”.

(2) New skills empowering people in inclusive societies, entrepreneurship and creativity and innovation:

Among the EU 2020 priorities the Commission mentions the one of “empowering people in inclusive societies ...” where “the acquisition of new skills (will be) fostering creativity and innovation, the development of entrepreneurship ...”. Another one is the one of “creating value by basing growth on knowledge ... “in a world where innovation makes the difference in both products and processes ...”.

The SEN@ER network partners (Silver Economy Network of European Regions) are in full agreement with the above statements but would strongly argue for putting an even stronger emphasis on the emerging needs in the above areas already addressed which are stemming from the demographic change and ageing of our societies which have not or only insufficiently been addressed so far.

++ Demographic change

The Silver Economy Network of European Regions (SEN@ER) strongly encourages the European Commission to put a much stronger emphasis on the demographic change and ageing of society which without any doubts can be seen as one of the current and future key trends strongly affecting our societies and economies. SEN@ER also encourages the European Commission to adopt an approach, which views the demographic change and the ageing of society as an opportunity and not as a threat and develop forward-looking approaches of addressing these and reaping benefits from it.

In a recent Communication on “Dealing with the impact of ageing population in the EU (2009 Ageing Report)” of 29 April 2009 the European Commission takes an in-depth look at the economic and budgetary impact of an ageing population over the long-term until 2060 and calls for a renewed strategy to tackle Europe's demographic challenge. It clearly states that governments have a window of opportunity before the baby-boom

generation retires to tackle the challenge. But the policy measures taken must be compatible with the need to support the economy at this juncture, as recommended in the December European Economic Recovery Plan. Ageing will already start affecting most EU economies in the coming decade.

++ Inclusive society: immigration / migration

A typical phenomenon of many European countries is that their older generations become increasingly ethnically and culturally diverse. European-wide official data on the exact numbers of migrant elders do not exist. However, the Country Office for Data Processing and Statistics of North Rhine Westphalia (it.NRW) estimates that their numbers will rise from 7 million in 2008 to 15 million in 2015.

In general, migrant elders are an extremely heterogeneous group, socially, culturally and economically. The ethnic diversity of old age in Europe will rapidly increase in future decades. In many European regions, local authorities, housing associations, welfare and volunteer organisations will have to adjust their services to the new challenges of cultural diversity, creating new cultural, social and economic conditions. However, on a European level, these potentials and chances are not yet sufficiently being realised. Questions of integration and participation of migrant elders are quite new on the European political agenda and there is an urgent need of them to be addressed.

In doing this migrant elders should not be regarded as a “target group” but as partners with equal rights and, therefore, as subjects and not objects of their life environment. Services should not be developed for but with them. Social, cultural, economic and political participation needs to be promoted in all fields. The participation of organisations of migrants and their local representation has to be strengthened. Their political, social and economic involvement has to be improved. New forms of intercultural initiatives for older people and new intergenerational activities must be developed and installed. Existing possibilities for contact and exchange between immigrated and indigenous elders should be broadened. Networking needs to be further promoted.

++ Active employment opportunities: entrepreneurship

Demographic trends in Europe over the past years are showing a population decline over the next several decades. The working age population will increase over the next 10 years and show a steady decline thereafter. Thus the gap between demand for skilled workers and the available labour pool is expected to widen in region after region throughout the EU 27 over the coming decades.

In Europe, the traditional working-age population (defined is between 15 and 64 years old) is expected to decline sharply, from 307 million in 2004 to 255 million in 2050, a decline of 52 million workers (Population Projections 2004 – 2050 – Eurostat 2005). While it is difficult to predict the rate of recovery and growth in the world economies and the associated rate of job creation, over the next several decades the demand for workers in most EU countries will almost certainly outstrip the growth rate in workers within the conventional age band.

The baby boomer generation are very well positioned to take advantage of the upcoming need for more workers and better skilled workers in the European Economy. This group of people who are retired or who will retire in the next 10 years have a level of wealth,

income and skill sets that is unlikely to be repeated in future generations. Thus, they represent an opportunity for the European Economy to improve its competitiveness, skills sets and workforce participation by encouraging this cohort to contribute to their communities by remaining in the workforce.

We now know that in future years employers will have problems in replacing workers who leave the workforce, and also will experience problems replacing the skills and experiences lost every time someone retires.

We also know that there is an incoming huge number of people currently over 50 who will be approaching “traditional” retirement in the next 10 years, and this cohort are enjoying good health, have strong work skills and financial resources and low debt levels. Future generations will have such people, but never so many as there are today. Once this cohort has aged and lost its ability and enthusiasm to spend, it will not be replaced by another of equal wealth. Thus the EU Countries have a window of opportunity up to about 2017 to engage this cohort and to keep them actively engaged in the workforce and their communities whereby this engagement can take different forms ranging from continuing with traditional employment to advising younger entrepreneurs, business starting (starting an own business) or partnering (supporting business set up of (younger) entrepreneurs) to investing and acquiring.

++ Empowering people: (new) skills

Closely related to the above is the fact that European companies will be faced with an ever increasing shortage of qualified workers in several occupations and sectors and in particular in the ICT occupations. Several studies commissioned by the European Commission have pointed to this problem and a very recent one from December 2009 (www.eskills-monitor.eu) came up with figures on the lack of ICT practitioners in Europe in 2015 ranging from 384,000 in a ‘Back to Normal’ scenario up to 670,000 in a more optimistic scenario.

In order to counter these developments there is a need to increase the number of ICT practitioners from among university graduates (mainly in subjects like computer science, but also related subjects) and from training and certification activities through vendor-independent training and certification schemes. However, another important means to close this gap would be the encouragement of continuous lifelong learning activities among the older ICT workforce, to provide them with the skills that are in demand, thus avoiding early retirement and keeping them in employment as long as possible.

++ Creativity and innovation:

The European Commission has announced the year 2009 as the European Year of Creativity and Innovation. The Commission aims to raise awareness of the importance of creativity and innovation for personal, social and economic development; to disseminate good practices; to stimulate education and research, and to promote policy debate on related issues. The key message conveyed is that “creativity and innovation contribute to economic prosperity as well as to social and individual wellbeing”

SEN@ER argues that Europe needs to utilise the skills, knowledge and experience of the older generation to provide (voluntary) educational and other services to children and the younger generation. The latter could include a variety of services where the older

generation can act as mentor to the younger generation making use of the life experience of older people.

It is also recommended to encourage further cultural activity of the older generation by way of supporting the participation of older people not only in viewing cultural events but also actively engaging in cultural activities themselves.

Activities in this area should also have a cross-country and truly European dimension. New forms of intercultural initiatives for older people and new intergenerational activities must be developed and installed. Existing possibilities for contact and exchange between immigrated and indigenous elders should be broadened. Networking needs to be further promoted.

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Lebensqualität im Alter - ökonomische Bedürfnisse älterer Menschen

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The **SEN@ER - Silver Economy Network of European Regions** is a joint initiative of European regions initiated by the region of North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany). Its members are the following European regions:

- North Rhine-Westphalia
- North West England
- Limousin
- Lower Saxony
- Mid-East Region
- Yorkshire and The Humber
- Limburg
- Gelderland
- Extremadura.

This European initiative regards the ageing of our society not as a threat but rather as a challenge and an opportunity for regional economic growth and for improving Europe's competitiveness. To realise this, the Silver Economy Network of European Regions (SEN@ER) has been established as a European-wide network of regions to promote the development and marketing of innovative products and services aimed at this new market segment, thereby contributing to regional development and job creation. The SEN@ER was founded and established on 18 February 2005 at the first European Silver Economy Conference in Bonn, Germany.