

Social enterprise conference – concluding remarks SVL

I would like to start by thanking the numerous participants for their presence and the interest they have showed in today's conference, as well as Mr Scalvini, President of CECOP, who accepted to deliver the closing remarks and I very much welcome what he said. He has greatly facilitated my own task of closing this conference, but not without sharing my own thoughts with you.

1. The objective of the conference and the study

We organised the meeting today, because we wanted to present and discuss the study on social enterprises which we commissioned.

In addition we also wanted to take advantage of the day to give the floor to some social entrepreneurs, so they could tell us about their own experience, and to have some presentations of ways to support social enterprises, all elements which are important for feeding our reflexion on future activities in this field.

We have listened very carefully to the critical remarks which were made about the study. I understand that the concept issue is central to these remarks. In addition, it is felt the study is not complete and, especially, not always accurate in its description of the situation in the different countries. We will reflect on the way of making the written remarks which we have received available¹.

As a reminder, the aim of the study was to describe key features of the social enterprise sector and to identify and present relevant support measures. I continue to believe that the study is a useful contribution if only, as was already said this morning, because it has triggered of an interesting debate, which I expect to continue also in the future.

Finally, I feel the need to underline, that the choice of the contractor was made following a call for tender, as a result of a fully transparent process, taking into account the selection and award criteria published, guaranteeing equal treatment of the interested tenderers. Therefore, the choice made was determined by the offers presented and their quality.

2. The concept

I have heard many notions today:

- social economy
- third sector
- social enterprises
- social entrepreneurship (something else than social enterprises)
- cooperatives, which sometimes, but not always, consider themselves to be part of the social economy, regardless of their objective.

¹ Links are made to the websites of the organisations who made available comments beyond the presentations during the conference, which are also available from the conference website.

What is accepted by everybody is that there are different types of enterprises (different from 'traditional' capital companies) which can be defined either by the objective they pursue or by their way of functioning (including legal forms).

We all agree that the big diversity in realities in the Member States is also a richness which we do not want to lose. I also have the impression that we are confronted with a fast moving reality...

Today's conference was about social enterprises: enterprises, regardless of their legal form, which combine entrepreneurial spirit with pursuing social or societal objectives. While profit is often needed and a limited distribution is not always excluded, it is mainly reinvested to contribute to the objectives pursued.

We had 3 examples of such enterprises at the very start of the day.

3. The future

Today we had a very good exchange of information, thanks to the active participation of the numerous people present.

I tried to note down some interesting ideas which we will keep in mind and which come in addition to what was already said by Mr Scalvini:

- integrated support structures for social enterprises, including peer support
- the notions of social market, of social stock exchange
- the notion of social benefit – projects cannot be evaluated on the price only, but social benefit should also be taken into account.

I would like to remind you that, to start with, we are going to fund 2 projects in 2009. We will launch

- a call for tender for a study evaluating (in a wide sense) the European Cooperative Statute and which will also look at some other developments in the cooperative sector
- a call for proposals to fund pilot projects in the area of the establishment of satellite accounts for cooperatives and mutuals.

We will select the best projects presented, applying the selection and award criteria included in the calls. We count on you to help us gather interest for these calls, so that we receive a sufficient number of good quality projects...

And last but not least, we are also reflecting on a Commission document on this diversity of business forms, timing and status of which is still being discussed internally...