



National consultation events on the European Pillar of Social Rights - report from BELGIUM

Representation in: Brussels

Date: 13 July 2016

Participants: 49

Event title: Expert Roundtables on the European Pillar of Social Rights

Description: In the framework of the ongoing public consultation on the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Representation of the European Commission in Belgium organised a series of three separate work sessions with respectively representatives from the Belgian social partners, civil society and academics with a track-record in the area of social policy and EMU deepening.

Main conclusions:

There was general agreement among participants on the need for convergence in labour markets and welfare systems performances to improve the functioning of the EMU. However, views differed on how to achieve this and what role the European Pillar of Social Rights can have in this process.

Social partners

The **employers' associations** tended to support the Commission's proposal to agree on a set of principles that can guide EU and Member States actions, while respecting subsidiarity. Possible benchmarks should focus on outputs and not policies. The pillar's main purpose should be to support people's abilities to gain access to the labour market and tackle the widening skills gap observed in Belgium. The pillar should also balance both rights and duties, the latter by obliging people to seize all opportunities to become and remain active participants in society. Finally, the pillar should in the first place lead to actions that improve implementation of the 'acquis' (e.g. through the European Semester process) rather than leading to additional measures. The **trade unions** were less optimistic about what the pillar could achieve to promote upward convergence. They considered that the principles should be formulated more strongly. They called for the pillar to be a true "bill of rights", and perhaps more importantly even, to have it matched with a concrete agenda and legislative proposals. Finally, new actions geared towards modernising the acquis should not be synonym for disrupting social protection.

Civil society

Although some civil society groups were also worried whether the pillar would be able to achieve more than previous social policy coordination mechanisms, most participants supported the Commission's plans. Comments therefore focused on strengthening areas of particular concern to each of them, for example facilitating access to the labour market for young people or social protection for marginalised groups. Nearly all organisations saw a particular role for education, including as tool to enhance the place of women in society and the world of work. Several participants also warned that education and life-long-learning should not only

improve access to the labour market but also lead to people being better citizens that can play an active role in society.

Academics

While academics agreed on the importance of economic and social coherence in the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), opinions differed on how this should be achieved. A minority saw the pillar as an unwelcome divergence of what's really needed for social convergence, namely fixing the macro-economic policies of the EMU. Most participants, however, insisted on the need to strengthen the social dimension of the EMU, not only for social but also for economic reasons. Most therefore believe that the pillar forms a good basis for this and could lead to a broad consensus about a common 'social order'. However, in order to reduce the risk of failure, it is very important to keep a clear connection with the 'hard' agenda on completing the EMU.