



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Brussels, 27 AVR. 2009
C/2009/ 2933

Dear Mr President,

Thank you for transmitting the Austrian Bundesrat's contribution to the Communication from the Commission on "A renewed commitment to social Europe: reinforcing the open method of coordination for social protection and social inclusion" {COM(2008) 418}.

In line with the Commission's decision to encourage National Parliaments to react to its proposals to improve the process of policy formulation, we welcome this opportunity to respond to your comments. I enclose the Commission's response. I hope you will find these a valuable contribution to your own deliberations.

I look forward to developing our policy dialogue further in the future.

Yours sincerely

Margot WALLSTRÖM
Vice-President of the European Commission

Herrn Harald Reisenberger
Präsident des Bundesrates
A-1017 WIEN



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Bruxelles, April 2009

COMMENTS OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION ON AN OPINION FROM THE AUSTRIAN BUNDESRAT.

COM(2008) 418- COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS "A RENEWED COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL EUROPE: REINFORCING THE OPEN METHOD OF COORDINATION FOR SOCIAL PROTECTION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION"

This reply refers to the common position which was submitted to the president of the Committee of the Regions of the common position of the Austrian Bundesländer following a subsidiarity test of the 2 July 2008 Commission Communication on "A renewed commitment to social Europe: reinforcing the open method of coordination for social protection and social inclusion" (the Social OMC hereafter).

The remit of the Social OMC is indeed one where Member States retain full legislative competence and subsidiarity principles are fully respected. Nonetheless, given that several key challenges are common, Member States have chosen, in the social field as in several others, to engage in voluntary cooperation in the framework of the open method of coordination. The aim is to achieve mutual learning on effective and efficient policy responses, and joint identification and exchange of best practices.

With this in mind, Common Objectives¹, constituting the overall reference framework of the Social OMC, have been adopted by the European Council (the current set of Objectives, adopted in March 2006, was reconfirmed in 2008). A set of indicators have been agreed to enable the assessment of baseline situations and monitoring of developments. Systematic and regular reporting and assessment of progress are integrated parts of the cooperation, while attention was given in the major review of the process in 2006 to simplify reporting provisions and ensure to avoid an excessive administrative burden on the Member States.

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/spsi/common_objectives_en.htm

The setting of quantitative targets has been subject to considerable debate in the framework of the OMC, in particular in the Social Protection Committee. The Commission and the Council agreed in its shared assessment of the renewed National Strategies (2008-2010) for social protection and social inclusion that: *"while the decision on setting national quantified targets and their definition remains a core responsibility of the Member States, the positive role of the Social OMC could be further strengthened by evidence-based national target-setting."* (Joint Report on social protection and social inclusion 2009, adopted by the EPSCO Council on 9 March 2009).

One of the overarching Objectives is to promote *"good governance, transparency and the involvement of stakeholders in the design, implementation and monitoring of policy"*. One of the specific objectives relating to the social inclusion strand stipulates that social inclusion policies should be *"well-coordinated and involve all levels of government and relevant actors, including people experiencing poverty"*. Also the specific objectives relating to *"adequate and sustainable pensions"* and to *"accessible, high-quality and sustainable healthcare and long-term care"* expands on the overarching good governance objective.

In this context, the Commission considers that a more extensive involvement of National Parliaments in work linked to the Social OMC is fully in line with the Common Objectives and shares the view of the Austrian Bundesrat that this should be further strived for. As part of its assessment of National Strategies for social protection and social inclusion, the Commission regularly examines governance aspects, including the degree of involvement of all relevant stakeholders in their preparation and implementation. In an annex to the 2009 Joint Report referred to above, providing more detailed thematic analysis it is highlighted that: *"In general, it seems that only a few Member States have used the preparation of the reports as an opportunity for broader awareness-raising activities in the media and society at large. Only on rare occasions has there been a real broad public debate. Parliament seems to have debated the NAP in only some countries (NL, DE, MT)."* The Commission will continue to encourage further efforts in this direction. Moreover, the Communication on reinforcing the Social OMC does include some proposals which would contribute to strengthening the democratic nature of the process.