



CEC TRG on Employment and Social Issues – 5-6 September 2016

Minutes

Participants: OKR Ralf Charbonnier, Vladimir Gerka, Rev Juha Mattila, Dr Martin Schenk, Eva Ungvari, Fr George Valcu

Guest: Heather Roy, General Secretary Eurodiaconia

Apologies: Prof Constantin Delikostantis and Dr Vassilios Meichanetsidis

TOP 1 Welcome and opening

Fischbach welcomed the participants and opened the meeting reminding of the watchwords of the day.

TOP 2 Moderator for the TRG ESI

Fischbach proposed Martin Schenk, delegated by the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Austria, Deputy Director of the Austrian Diaconia and a long-standing member in this kind of work in CEC (and former CSC), as moderator for the group. Martin Schenk was willing and ready to do this. The members agreed and elected Schenk unanimously.

TOP 3 Adoption of the minutes of the last meeting

The minutes were approved.

TOP 4 Introduction to the European Commission's proposal for a European Pillar of Social Rights, Egbert Holthuis, European Commission, Directorate General Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion

Holthuis introduced the Pillar by describing first the challenges: the economic and financial crisis, which led to a social crisis in many Member States (MSs), the changes in the world of work (digitalisation; short-term contracts etc.), the demographic trends, the different performances of the MSs, especially in employment and social policies. A wide divergence in employment between the countries exists in the EU and in the Euro zone. Automation will affect profoundly the world of work in the next decades, as it has already done, for instance in the rise and fall of Nokia and its consequences for Finland. Divergence exists also in the gender gap in many societies in Europe. The demographic development is different – SE, NO, FR and UK have a younger population; in SK and CZ the population is ageing rapidly. These divergences can have spill-over effects onto other societies. Holthuis explained the structure of the pillar and its three chapters. The public questionnaire covers 10 questions about the analysis of the situation and the pillar. The public consultation was launched in March this year and will be finished on 31 December. The evaluation of the consultation will enter into the White Paper on the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) in spring 2017. The Commission would be especially interested in examples of good practice. But the consultation contains also the discussion about the right priorities for Europe and a vision for Europe.

In the subsequent discussions Holthuis explained that the proposal for a social pillar addresses in first instance the euro zone because the EMU has more competences to implement the rights. Rules here are stricter, even sanctions are possible. At the end Holthuis underlined that the Commission would be very much interested in the contribution of the churches, because they have knowledge from the grassroots level. In the consultation process the Commission is especially listening as to how to figure out what is possible and acceptable to bring forward.

TOP 5 Discussion and internal work on the Commission's proposal and the public consultation

The participants expressed different observations, reflections and arguments, which will also form part of the answers to the questionnaire.

It was highlighted that the Commission seems really to be interested in a contribution from the churches. The problems are described clearly, but there exists no consensus on the political agenda. It seems that the Commission needs support and to have clear results. The problem is that the proposed pillar is going beyond what MSs want. Is a two track Europe – the Euro zone and the others – an answer to the problems? It would be important to answer what we think what is missing in the pillar, e. g. cross-border- or EU mobility; over-indebtedness.

Another discussion might be if the discussion about the pillar is only a discussion inside a system but not about the real reasons for the problems. Do we need structural changes and another way of redistributing wealth? Can the test of an introduction of a basic income in FI be a step forward which has to be considered? What is about the tax system?

The migration issue is missing in the document, but also the consequences of EU labour mobility. Young, well skilled people are leaving Romania, with all the inherent consequences for families, but also e. g. for medical care. In FI the number of long-term unemployed has risen in the last years. They receive only low social benefits. Health care is on a low level for them. The young people in RO need good and stable jobs. Jobs which include family balance. The transition from job to job has to become easier. Equal pay for men and women for the same work at the same place, but also between workers with different national backgrounds has to be imposed. This kind of inequality exists also between urban and rural regions in many countries. In AU the debate about refugees has led to a decrease in social benefits for all. In the last years it was discovered that a lack of social housing exists. In Austrian society health problems, especially depression, are rising. The labour market for 50 year-olds and older employees has become much more challenging. In DE the question of poverty of older people is a central discussion. Regarding migration, Human Rights education in schools and for democracy is required.

Beside the question of EU competences the EU Treaties refer to social cohesion as a central EU objective. But questions remain regarding the pillar proposal: To whom does it apply? What is its relation to migration policy? It is welcomed that the pillar contains the right of shelter. In answering the consultation questions on employment, precariousness, in-work poverty, but also the social protection of mobile workers should be reflected. From a church perspective it could also be highlighted that consumption is not the fulfilment of life. Prosperity is not only found in economic growth. In many countries social policies are challenged by a lack of resources due to an unfair distribution. The concept of the EU as a competitive economy might have failed. The problem of the

consultation is not only to answer in the system or logic of the actual economic system, but to look on the root sources of the problems caused by the actual economic system. It was reminded of St John Chrysostom, who said that the wealth accumulated by the wealthy is missing to the poor.¹

Some pointed out the special demands to advocate for children rights and for equality of children rights to be available to all children.

It should be reminded that the European project is also about social resources. Therefore, more sensitivity should be attributed to social capital and social problems. It's the Christian identity to seek for the common good.

The members of the TRG decided to participate in the public consultation. Fischbach shall establish a first draft which will be sent to all members for consultation (14.09). Remarks, amendments should be returned before 23.09., so that the questionnaire can be submitted end of September to the European Commission.

It might be that CEC, Eurodiaconia, COMECE and Caritas Europe, will work on a common statement about the pillar, where some ideas mentioned, can also be introduced.

TOP 6 Tour de Table – short reports about main activities in our churches and our work

Gerka reported from the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Churches which took place 18-27 June 2016 in Crete. Its documents referred also to the social teaching of the Orthodox churches. They were very much concentrated on this event in the recent months. In SK the situation has not much changed since the last meeting. He reported also about a conference of WCC on "Economy of life" in Hong Kong in which he participated. Hong Kong is a place demonstrating clearly the importance of reflecting growing inequality in our societies throughout the world.

Mattila presented recent developments with a PowerPoint presentation (attached). In Finland the social and health sector is undergoing a political debate about a reform. Unemployment and especially long-term unemployment are raising issues. In the cities and communes the social work shifts from food distribution to communal meals. The church seeks to open social political debates via social media.

Ungvari summarized the recent work of EYCE (presentation attached). From 2014 to 2016 EYCE has campaigned especially on poverty – "breaking the chain" – reflecting the UN Millenniums' declaration. The next three-year campaign will be on migration and integration.

¹ Quotes: St John Chrysostom (found by Maura O'Riordan from our office)

Not to share our own wealth with the poor is theft from the poor and deprivation of their means of life; we do not possess our own wealth, but theirs.

There is harm not only in trying to gain wealth but also in excessive concern with even the most necessary things. It is not enough to despise wealth, but you must also feed the poor and, more importantly, you must follow Christ.

Nothing is more fallacious than wealth. It is a hostile comrade, a domestic enemy.

Schenk reported from Austria on the community campaign which was organised together with the Catholic Church, to promote solidarity in the commune and work of the parishes. 15 years after the consultation and presentation of the “Sozialwort” (Common Social Word) the reflections were revisited in many parishes. Schenk highlighted further projects and publications, which can be looked at here: <http://diakonie.at/mindestsicherung> (on guaranteed minimum income), <http://www.mandelbaum.at/books/764/7685> (a critical publication about social innovation policies).

Fr Georges explained the difficult situation in Romania. Keywords were corruption as a structural problem undermining the rule of law; the unbalanced situation between high prices and low wages which leads to structural poverty; the demographic evolution with a decreasing fertility rate and well skilled young people going abroad to IT, ES, PT and UK.

TOP 7 The future of the CEC CALL-network – Church Action on Labour and Life: CALL – at a turning point (document)

Fischbach introduced the discussion paper. Gerka complemented the presentation highlighting the useful work the network has done through its Assemblies, conferences and working groups, especially on precarious work. The aims and the focus of the network have to be discussed and redefined. Mattila underlined the Finish experience that international, cross-border exchange is worthwhile. Ungvari agreed that it is important to get the interest of the participants and the professionalism of the churches.

TOP 8 Report about the CEC Ad-hoc WG on European Economic Governance - Consultation in Arnoldshain, July 2016 (information)

Fischbach reported on the conference and the process of work on this issue by the CEC Ad-hoc WG on European Economic Governance. The message aims to give an input and contribution to the EU debate on Deepening the Economic and Monetary Union for which the Commission will present a White Paper in spring 2017.

TOP 9 CEC open letter to Member Churches and Organisations in Partnership “What future for Europe?” June 2016 – on the way to the CEC Assembly 2018 (document)

Unfortunately not all Members had the same last version, due to the fact that a first draft for discussion had been sent out. The version, which was sent in the meantime to the CEC constituency, is published on the CEC website. Some crucial points are missing in the letter: the increase of racism and xenophobia in EU societies; the raise of right-wing parties; the war in Ukraine is only mentioned; the text is theoretical, the situation in the churches very different; social points are missing such as raising poverty, the demographic changes; if there are no longer enough jobs in Europe, what keeps as a person as a full member of society?; and how do the material issues refer to the question of identity? The wording of “reaffirming” or “reimagining” is unclear – the two terms do not mean the same thing.

*The TRG members drew some **conclusions** from the discussions of the meeting:*

1. TRG ESI will contribute to the public consultation on a European Pillar of Social Rights (TOP 5).

2. The TRG ESI proposed to work on inequality as one of the main challenges for societies in Europe and the EU as a whole, which was also highlighted in recent years continuously in the reports of the European Commission and the Parliament. Gaps are getting bigger – education, health, access to social services, and others. It also relates to questions of taxation and the distribution of wealth. The topic is close to the biblical question of social justice.

A model for a publication might be the document “Do not deny justice to your poor people – Proposals for combating poverty and social exclusion in the EU” by CSC-CEC, Eurodiaconia, COMECE and Caritas Europe in 2010.

The members of the TRG ESI are asked to prepare for the next meeting by researching for statements by their churches in recent years on the topic of inequality (or what might relate to this).

It is obvious that this work shall have a theological perspective but also address European policy.

It might be an interesting topic for the next CEC Assembly in 2018.

TOP 10 AOB (Any other business)

Next meeting 27-28 February 2017, Brussels (lunch time – lunch time)

Attachs:

PowerPoint presentations/slides