



Annual Convention for Inclusive Growth

Conference Report

Brussels › March 21, 2016



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Social Affairs
and Inclusion*

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➤ Building a stronger social Europe



The European Union (EU) and its Member States need to step up their efforts to fight poverty, reduce unemployment and make sure no one is left behind. In this context, the 1st Annual Convention for Inclusive Growth put social rights in the spotlight — and more specifically the recent proposal for a European Pillar of Social Rights.

The Convention brought together close to 400 participants from civil society organisations, national authorities, the EU institutions and other key stakeholder bodies. Their task was to examine what the EU can do to ensure that all of its citizens reap the benefits of truly inclusive growth.

Opening speeches were delivered by **Marianne Thyssen**, the Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills & Labour Mobility, and **Jetta Klijnsma**, Secretary of State for Social Affairs and Employment for the Netherlands. **Valdis Dombrovskis**, the European Commission's Vice-President for the Euro and Social Dialogue, delivered the Convention's concluding remarks.

Following the opening session, the event moved on to a discussion about the Social Pillar, before participants broke into workshops to debate specific challenges that need attention if the EU is to deliver long-term, sustainable and inclusive growth. Issues covered included active inclusion, social investment, the fight against poverty, the social dimension of the European Semester and the integration of refugees. A participatory format ensured that everyone present got to have their say.

All the discussions and contributions led to a number of recommendations on finding a new balance between a financial Europe and a social Europe.



➤ The opening session

Setting the scene — why hold such an event?

The Convention represented a firm commitment from the European Commission to reconnect policymaking at European level with the expertise and work of civil society organisations. The Commission's ambition is to foster a greater engagement and deeper dialogue with all stakeholders active in social and employment issues.

As **Commissioner Thyssen** said: 'By putting inclusive growth at the forefront, [the Convention] highlights the importance of strengthening the social dimension of the EU in all its facets — by fighting poverty, by building more cohesive societies, by modernising social protection and promoting social investment — and by improving employment opportunities and activation.'

According to the Commissioner, the EU has put fairness at the core of its agenda. However, she said that a truly Social Europe will only be achieved by ensuring that social considerations are better integrated into all EU policy areas. The Commission is

already taking concrete steps in this direction with initiatives such as:

- the Youth Guarantee;
- the proposal for a European Accessibility Act;
- ongoing work to promote work-life balance;
- the European Skills Agenda.

Commissioner Thyssen stressed that a **'triple A' social Europe** requires **fair and balanced growth** that leads to equal opportunities and adequate protection *for all* and throughout everyone's lifetimes — as well as the creation of decent, good-quality jobs.



Shared European values

The development of a European Pillar of Social Rights represents the latest step towards achieving these goals. Commissioner Thyssen argued that the European social model remains a success story. The EU is today the largest economy in the world and its citizens enjoy very high living standards. But it is much more than that because the Social Model and its values define the type of society Europe is and aspires to be. These shared European values have evolved as a set of social (and fundamental) rights, which are enshrined in national and European laws. At the same time, society needs to assess EU and Member State policies that relate to social affairs in the broadest sense of the word to ensure they are up to date and fit for purpose.

“Some of you are asking what a ‘Social Triple A’ stands for. For me, there is no doubt: it is an ambition – indeed, a commitment – that the economic strengthening of our Union goes hand-in-hand with improving people’s lives. This is the core of the European Social Model and a vital component of our social market economy.”

Commissioner Thyssen.

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Helping people help themselves

Secretary of State Jetta Klijnsma firmly believes an integrated approach is necessary to combat poverty. She also welcomed the fact that the social agenda is high on the European Commission’s political agenda.

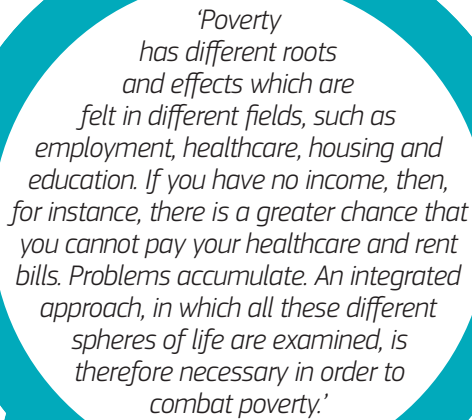
However, Ms Klijnsma asked her audience to consider a number of questions: What exactly is inclusive growth? What do we want to grow towards? And what is included in this journey? For her, **‘the crux of the matter is in the term**

inclusive. This term is best interpreted as being as inclusive as possible. **All-inclusive, therefore.’**

Ms Klijnsma was pleased to see that the fight against poverty was on the Convention’s agenda, along with employment. She said: ‘They are inter-related. You cannot consider them separately from one another.’

Fighting poverty in the EU is a top priority of the Dutch Presidency. Ms Klijnsma believes that this issue can be best addressed at the local level, close to and with the people themselves. The individual or family must be placed at the centre when assessing what the problems are and how they can best be resolved.





'Poverty has different roots and effects which are felt in different fields, such as employment, healthcare, housing and education. If you have no income, then, for instance, there is a greater chance that you cannot pay your healthcare and rent bills. Problems accumulate. An integrated approach, in which all these different spheres of life are examined, is therefore necessary in order to combat poverty.'

Jetta Klijnsma.



She praised a Belgium best practice which deploys experts with direct personal experience of poverty. These experts work in social services, debt counselling and other public institutions. The Netherlands is going to transfer this good idea so that people can transform their lives in a positive manner. The deployment of experts with practical experience is also an embodiment of inclusive growth. **Growth for all, but also by all!**

A conference who's who

To get a better understanding of who was attending the Convention, moderator Stien Michiels asked everyone a series of questions relating to which sector they represent, whether they work locally and/or globally, and which issues they care about.

The answers revealed a rich mix, with participants offering expertise in a variety of areas including social inclusion, poverty, social economy, social services, migration, people with disabilities, children's needs and rights, women's rights,

the Roma, homelessness and ageing. Participants represented civil society, Member States, local authorities, the EU institutions, the academic world and trade unions.

Mrs Michiels then asked the participants to take a minute to talk to a fellow delegate. The informal chat showed that those present thought it was important to attend the Convention to ensure that the concept of inclusive growth lives up to its billing — that it embraces the needs of everyone in society.





➤ The European Pillar of Social Rights

The new Social Pillar represents the next step in the development of the European Social Model. Mr Allan Larsson, Special Adviser to the Commission for the European Pillar of Social Rights, provided the conference with an insight into the Pillar and the extensive consultation process now being undertaken on the outline proposals.



Mr Larsson opened by taking stock of current economic and social realities, eight years after the worst financial crisis seen in a generation. Mr Larsson stated that 'it is a matter of fact that Europe has the best developed social system in the world'. However, he noted that it cannot simply be a case of business as usual, because the

continent faces a number of challenges, including:

- unemployment, poverty and social exclusion;
- growing divergences between Member States;
- new and changing working patterns;
- an ageing population.

Over the years, the Commission has taken numerous initiatives to address pressing economic, labour market and social priorities. It has also taken steps to update the 'social acquis'. Nevertheless, in order to create a more prosperous and resilient socio-economic model, further improvements are required at both EU and Member State level. Europe should take a holistic approach, building on new knowledge about the relationship between economic and social performance. There is also a demand for well-designed social protection systems, which can serve to boost economic growth and encourage prosperity to be shared more widely.

'Make no mistake — business as usual does not work, the old models do not work. The economic recovery alone will not be enough. Piecemeal reform will not be enough. It is time for new ideas, new strategies and new forms of cooperation to make Europe more business friendly and at the same time provide citizens with decent work, improved skills and better social protection.'

Allan Larsson.

Finding the right balance

The goal is to find a new balance between Financial Europe and Social Europe — to develop a new European model for inclusive growth and employment. This is why the Commission supports the Social Pillar and encourages social partners to commit to the consultation process.

Mr Larsson ended his address by describing the road map for consultation. 'It will be open, broad and last until the end of this year. It is open to all, and there is room for individuals to enter into the process. It is

obvious that the social partners have to play a leading role. Dialogue with NGOs and individuals close to the citizens and the problems on the ground is also key.'

Audience Q&A

Mr Larsson then answered questions from the conference floor.

- **Q — *The Anti-Poverty Network in the Netherlands:*** It is important to have a cross-cutting approach, create more opportunities and make social inclusion possible. In particular, how can people with disabilities be supported in entering employment?
- **A —** We share the view that access to decent work is very important. This is the reason why the Commission put jobs, skills and lifelong learning in the first area of the draft Pillar.
- **Q — *The Belgian Federal administration:*** What about the status of the Social Pillar? We are also concerned that the Communication on the Social Pillar seems to be a Communication about work. It is surprising that children are not included.
- **A —** Those are key issues that need to be addressed in the consultation. We need to deepen the discussion and find more balance between economic and social policy.
- **Q — *City of Graz and KFO-COFACE in Austria:*** How can the Commission help Member States ensure that all children go to school? Education can prevent poverty.
- **A —** Education and lifelong learning are indeed crucial. For example, there is a study by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) showing that the transition from poverty to economic development is made through education. This issue should be addressed in the consultation process.
- **Q — *An advocate for autism spectrum from Malta:*** What are the Commission's plans regarding the structured dialogue?
- **A —** There is a Communication Plan, plus several meetings are foreseen with the Social Platform, trade unions, the European Parliament and Member States. This will ensure that everybody can express their views.
- **Q — *The European Network for Social Authority:*** Demographic challenges need to be addressed, particularly for ageing people with disabilities. We have to prepare society for their inclusion and the protection of their rights.
- **A —** Ageing Europe is an important issue and we have to think about what works and what does not work. We need social protection systems that address this subject, and of course it is essential to target ageing in the social dialogue.
- **Q — *From the conference moderator, Shada Islam:*** What about migration and the refugee crisis — the biggest challenge that Europe currently faces?
- **A —** We need to improve Europe and make it more open for the integration of refugees. This is another reason why we should strengthen Social Europe.



➤ The Convention workshops

After the morning keynote addresses, participants broke into five parallel workshops. Discussions focused on delivering concrete conclusions and recommendations, which were then put to the conference as a whole.

WORKSHOP 1 Active Inclusion and Inclusive Labour Market

Participatory discussion

Participants engaged in an interactive World Café session and focused on answering the following questions:

- In the context of the European Pillar of Social Rights, what would you reinforce or revise to establish a comprehensive active inclusion strategy?
- How can the activation role of social benefits be strengthened within social protection schemes?
- How can you contribute to building an active inclusion strategy and to making its principles operational?

The workshop's topic was briefly introduced by the European Commission, with a reminder that Europe's modern economies are increasingly knowledge-based and have to face stiff competition in a globalised world. Therefore, creating supply-side conditions for employment

growth depends crucially on the ability of social protection systems to invest in skills for people of all ages. In addition, these investments must be protected throughout the course of people's lives.

Insufficient or ineffective social policies risk leading to lower educational outcomes, lower overall skills' development — and a lower-quality, less-productive workforce. Moreover, creating employment alone is often not enough to reduce poverty and social exclusion. Labour markets must be made more inclusive through further reforms, in particular by improving the efficiency of public employment services and by increasing the effectiveness of activation measures. Actions here could include linking activation and social assistance with enabling services so that everyone has a fair chance of getting a job and earning a decent living.

In addition, more attention needs to be paid to the different aspects of job quality, such as pay and benefits, working conditions, work-life balance, access to training and adequate social protection.





Key conclusions and recommendations

... reported during the plenary session by Alfonso Montero (European Social Network)

- **Active Inclusion needs to be clearly spelled out in the Pillar**, and comprehensively cover all areas of active inclusion.
- The involvement of **local authorities and stakeholders at local level** is key to ensuring the Pillar's implementation.
- **Education and training** should be strengthened for those furthest from the labour market.
- **Public-private partnership** approaches should be promoted.
- **Benchmarks** are key to ensuring Member State accountability — plus they should be aligned with the European Semester's Country-Specific Recommendations (**CSRs**).
- **Human rights** — including equality and diversity — should be mainstreamed in the Pillar.
- **Delivery Services** should be strengthened, for example efforts should be made to raise staff qualifications.
- There is a division of opinions on the role of social benefits — **safety nets** versus **activation incentives**.
- Europe needs **an integrated approach** which embraces other benefits and services.
- Europe needs more **direct involvement of employees and employers**: reinforcing the principle of corporate social responsibility is also a requirement.
- **Piloting and testing initiatives** in areas such as advocacy, provision of data and evidence, and innovation would be of great value.
- **Greater clarity of policy guidance** would be helpful, asking questions such as: What does the policy intend to achieve? Where does it intend to go?

WORKSHOP 2

Social Investment and the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI)

Participatory discussion

This session focused on opportunities and barriers relating to the EFSI's ability to unlock investment in the social services sector. The Fund can be used as a tool to boost investment in times of low confidence. Its remit includes financing social projects that deliver improvements in both infrastructure and human capital.

Giorgio Chiarion-Casoni (Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs, ECFIN)

presented the EFSI and explained how it functions. He stressed that the Fund can be used to back riskier projects than those supported by the European Investment Bank (EIB). Mr Chiarion-Casoni also pointed out that there is no sectorial allocation or country quotas for the EFSI, which makes it different from other EU funds. It is important to fully understand what EFSI can and cannot do — and what makes it a different instrument compared to the other sources of finance, like the European Social Fund.

Luk Zederloo (European Association of Services Providers for People with Disabilities, EASPD)

stated that EFSI regulation is clear, but social service providers have difficulties in accessing funds. The use of the EFSI should be promoted as a tool to ease access to credit for specific projects, such as community-based infrastructures or investment in human capital. **Thomas Bignal (also from EASPD)** presented a recent study on how social service providers can access the EFSI and some of the barriers they may face.

John Halloran (European Social Network)

noted that many national authorities have a sectorial bias. To change this, efforts should be made to bring the economic and social spheres closer together while making it clear that investment in the social area is also good for the economy. Moreover, investment should be seen in preventive terms, for example there should be more investment in early years' education.

Dirk Coeckelbergh (NewB — cooperative bank)

pointed out that EFSI-financed projects have, until now, been mostly in the non-social sector. Moreover, the banks do not provide information on their websites on how to access EFSI funding.

Following the panel presentations, participants worked together to answer the following questions:

- What kinds of barriers are hindering the use of the fund in the social sector?
- What can the European Commission do to remove these barriers?
- What is needed to ensure that the supported projects are of sufficient quality?





Key conclusions and recommendations

... reported during the plenary session by Valentina Caimi (Social Platform)

A number of barriers were identified which hinder the use of the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) in the social sector:

- There is a **lack of information and products** tailored to the social sector.
- The **operational definition of social enterprise is narrower** than the Social Business Initiative.
- Financial institutions have **limited knowledge and understanding of the social sector** and they think it is a risky investment option.
- Public authorities operate under **fiscal constraints** due to austerity measures, which **limit their investment capacity**.

Recommendations to remove these barriers:

- **Improve accessibility to information** by, for instance: setting up a one-stop-shop; increasing the EFSI portal's transparency; providing concrete examples of projects.
- **Improve the technical capacity of local authorities and service providers.**
- **Involve experts** from existing platforms to improve financial institutions' understanding of the social sector — **and develop more tailored instruments.**

- **Build on expertise** from insurance companies, ethical banks and social finance providers.
- **Increase budgetary flexibility**, in particular for countries that invest in the social sector.

Recommendations to ensure the quality of projects:

- Include an assessment of the quality of social services in the **eligibility criteria**, through, for instance, the EU Voluntary Quality Framework for social services and via user satisfaction assessments.
- Ensure **consistency with the European Structural & Investment Funds ex-ante conditionality**, especially regarding de-institutionalisation.
- **Involve social sector experts** in existing platforms, including for the development of quality criteria. In addition, **involve users** in all project stages.
- Improve the **technical capacity** of local authorities and service providers.
- **Train** the European Investment Bank, the European Investment Fund and financial intermediaries in the concept of quality in social services.
- Prioritise investments that embed **social investment approaches** and a **long-term** perspective.





WORKSHOP 3

Upward Social Convergence and Fighting Poverty

Participatory discussion

This workshop examined the function of the Pillar and whether the principles included in its draft outline could effectively address Europe's pressing social challenges. Participants focused on answering the following questions:

- Do you agree with the scope of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the principles proposed? In your view, is there anything that should be adjusted or added to the Pillar to address issues relating to poverty and inequality more effectively, and if so, what?
- In your view, how should the EU make the Pillar's principles operational? Please give one or two examples.

The Commission briefly framed the topic by reminding the participants that Europe is still facing far-reaching social challenges, including high levels

of poverty and social exclusion, long-term unemployment and rising inequality. Moreover, the EU is currently further away from reaching its Europe 2020 target to reduce poverty than when it was first established. High levels of divergence in terms of social outcomes between and within Member States raise further concerns, especially in the EMU zone where these divergences are most acute.

Over the years, the EU has undertaken substantial efforts to address poverty, reduce inequality and improve social outcomes. Nevertheless, more needs to be done if Europe is to deal effectively with social challenges at hand. A European Pillar of Social Rights would support greater upward social convergence while addressing poverty and inequality. The Pillar can establish key principles that could enable labour markets and social policies to function more effectively. Indeed, EMU Member States could use the Pillar as a framework for policy reform.

Key conclusions and recommendations

...reported during the plenary session by Elke Vandermeersch (The Belgian Anti-Poverty Network)

The discussions started with a 'human barometer'. Participants positioned themselves in a line, depending on how far they recognised themselves and the things they find important in the proposal for a European Pillar of Social Rights. A lot of the people ended up in the middle because it was too early to offer a firm view.

When discussing the questions, participants articulated common key messages:

- **Europe needs more focus on the social issues.** Today, there is too much focus on growth and employment. While these remain important issues, what is really needed is a

Pillar for the development of social rights, social justice and the fight against poverty.

- **Current policies and financial frameworks are creating poverty.** This crucial issue is not addressed enough in the Pillar, creating some doubt about the impact it might have. Another framework is required that ensures redistribution of wealth.
- **There needs to be a stronger link to other policies and strategies,** including EU2020 and its poverty target.
- **Is the Pillar ambitious enough?** Looking at minimum standards is very different than working towards upward social convergence. We need to stop the race to the bottom.

Debate about the scope of the Pillar, and what could be adjusted or added, resulted in a lot of proposals. Participants agreed that the following topics are priorities:

- **Anti-discrimination** legislation for different groups.
 - **Education** should be strengthened in the Pillar.
 - **Poverty and people experiencing poverty** themselves need more attention. This issue should be addressed directly in the Pillar, not only indirectly through employment policies. The principle of **redistribution** is also key.
 - **To tackle inequality,** accessible services for all citizens — including children and refugees — are required.
 - A standardised methodology must be developed for **minimum income schemes.**
 - **Long-term solutions** are important.
- When looking at ways to make the Pillar's principles truly operational, participants agreed that the following were crucial:
- **Consultation is really important, but it is time to take action.** There is now a real sense of urgency.
 - A quality consultation process should **involve vulnerable groups,** such as people experiencing poverty, people with disabilities and the homeless.
 - **Strong laws** are necessary if the Pillar is to have a real impact.
 - **Firm targets, good monitoring and a strong legal basis** must go hand-in-hand with national ownership.
 - A **better and more focused use of European Funds is required.** The question of how the Pillar's implementation will be financed is crucial.
 - **Ante- and post- social impact assessments** are important to ensure new policies actually work.



WORKSHOP 4

Social Dimension of the European Semester

Participatory discussion

This session was designed so that participants could gain a better understanding of the relevance of the European Semester and its strengthened social dimension. It sparked discussion and mutual learning regarding how to influence the process — both in Brussels and in the Member States. Issues covered included finding ways to make civil society efforts more effective in terms of agenda setting, policy design and implementation.

Before the audience discussion, a panel of experts, chaired by **Jeroen Jutte** (Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, DG EMPL), offered their views on the Semester:

➤ **Bart Vanhercke** is Director of ESO and has studied the social dimension of the European Semester. He concluded that the Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs) have become more social over time, however the influence of NGOs and social partners remains limited.

➤ **Paul Ginnell**, co-chairperson of EAPN, Europe's policy working group, stated that the CSRs' financial goals remain dominant compared to environmental and social goals — especially poverty targets. On the other hand, the Country Reports for 2016 show an improvement with more focus on social issues.

➤ **Steven Engels** from the EU Representation in Belgium believes that the dialogue between Member States and civil society has deepened in the last six years.

➤ **Ulrika Hall**, Senior Advisor from the Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, noted that there is political support in Sweden for the European Semester to be given a more social focus. She also advocated national ownership of the feedback process.

The participatory process resulted in a lively discussion among the audience. After all the participants' contributions were written down in short statements, those present identified the main areas of action.



Key conclusions and recommendations

... reported during the plenary session by Heather Roy (Eurodiaconia)

Stakeholder involvement

- The **timing and method** required for civil society to provide input into the Semester **should be made sufficiently clear**.
- The Commission should **listen carefully** to what civil society has to say.
- **Stakeholders** such as people experiencing poverty, migrants and children **should also be acknowledged** when providing input — **and taken seriously**.
- **Civil society** can only be effective in providing inputs when it has **sufficient** resources.
- The Commission should put greater effort into making the European Semester as **accessible** as possible in terms of **language and guidelines**. Conversely, civil society should make more effort to acquaint themselves with the guidelines and language.
- **Member States** need to be **accountable** in terms of how and when they involve civil

society. Ideally they should explain their consultation processes in their reports to the Commission.

- **Structured mechanisms** should be developed and have similar weight to the social dialogue.

Political orientation

- The Semester should better **reflect existing initiatives**, such as the Recommendations on Active Inclusion and Investing in Children.
- **National political ownership** should be taken when civil society provides its input — this would make the process more effective.
- The **relationship between the European Semester and the proposed European Pillar of Social Rights** should be clarified — What is its legal status? How will progress be measured? Will benchmarks be included?
- Clarify **incentives** on how to use and implement CSRs at national level.



WORKSHOP **5**

Integration of Refugees

Participatory discussion

This workshop identified a number of key challenges relating to the social and labour market exclusion of refugees and migrants. Racism and discrimination were said to underscore the system, which prevents refugees from exercising what rights they have. Newcomers also struggle to get work because they find it difficult to access language and training opportunities. A lack of resources for housing, education and mental health also prevents migrants from integrating into European society.

In addition, it was noted that migration status can change due to factors such as redundancy or a rejected asylum application. This can adversely affect a person's long-term prospects and limit access to social services. The workshop also examined the role of various institutional actors charged with shaping policies and delivering services to refugees and migrants.

Key conclusions and recommendations

...reported during the plenary session by Michele Levoy (PICUM)

- **Racism and discrimination** are key barriers to the integration of migrants and refugees, including women, who generally remain **'voiceless'**. Migrants may have rights in theory, but in practice they are often not realised. Migrants and refugees need to be given an active voice in decisions that affect them.
- **Active support for labour market inclusion.** Migrants and refugees should be granted access to social and employment services from day one as they are crucial for integration. There needs to be more targeted support for asylum seekers and refugees in terms of language training and skills/qualification assessments to make it easier for them to enter the job market.
- **Access to work permits.** Some Member States impose long delays on asylum seekers who wish to access the labour market. In addition, there are often restrictions on the occupations that asylum seekers and refugees can undertake. All migrants should be provided with legal access to work permits to ensure effective integration. Such a move would also help prevent migrants from ending up in irregular work, which can put them at even greater risk of social exclusion and exploitation.
- **Access to social services.** The European Pillar of Social of Rights should be extended to encompass everyone, whatever their migration status. All migrants should be granted access to social services immediately because such support is crucial for



labour market and social integration. Basic rights such as access to healthcare, housing and education are universal human rights. The Pillar should reflect this universality.

- The EU needs to engage and channel **funding** directly to the local level, where integration is happening.
- There needs to be **more cooperation between national institutions and local authorities** who are in charge of implementing integration policies. Member States that have limited experience of integrating asylum seekers and refugees should be provided with additional support.
- **Coordination of migration and social policies.** DG EMPL should have more ownership in the design of the Commission's migration policy.
- **Safe and regular channels.** DG EMPL and DG HOME should work together to provide safe and regular channels for refugees and migrants who come to the EU. They should also help local authorities provide adequate protection and services to assist in the integration of newcomers.
- **A more inclusive dialogue.** Migrants and refugees are often excluded from the discussions at EU level. Efforts should be made to involve them in the design and implementation of migration and integration policies.



➤ Side events: Sharing experiences through open debate

The Convention's side events gave stakeholders the opportunity to showcase their work and strengthen their relationships with other social policy actors. The goal was to create an open environment which could nurture cooperation and where innovative ideas could flourish.

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Hopefully, the events have provided participants with inspiration, which will see some of the best ideas taken up in other parts of Europe.

Organisation	Title	Topic	Short description
EASPD	Developing Inclusive Labour Markets for all: the role of supported employment	Employment	<p>The topic: Supported employment is a proven method that enables individuals with disabilities to secure real jobs in the open labour market. To ensure success, training and other support measures are provided on an ongoing basis.</p> <p>The event: The event explored issues relating to the transferability of supported employment to other disadvantaged groups such as the long-term unemployed, migrants and older people.</p>
EAPN	Ensuring EU money delivers on poverty and social exclusion	ESF and poverty reduction	<p>The topic: Current regulations stipulate that at least 20% of ESF funding must be earmarked for social inclusion and poverty reduction. Meanwhile, the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) aims to support Member States in the provision of material assistance to the very poorest people.</p> <p>The event: Participants assessed progress on the 20% ESF allocation as well as the implementation of the FEAD programme. Debate drew on the results of an EAPN survey and input from the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). Participants stressed the value of ESF and FEAD, and the importance of civil society engagement as partners in the design, evaluation and delivery of these funds.</p>



Organisation	Title	Topic	Short description
ETUC	Combatting in-work poverty: more effective tools for inclusion for ALL	In-work poverty and the Social Pillar	<p>The topic: In-work poverty is a frustrating issue considering people with jobs should be able to secure decent lives for themselves.</p> <p>The event: This event highlighted the impact of in-work poverty on different groups of workers. Participants assessed possible solutions and lessons to be learnt which could be transferred to the European Social Pillar. Low real salaries, wage setting policies, labour market fragmentation and inadequate social protection in times of austerity were among the issues covered. Those attending agreed that social and workers' rights must be reaffirmed to help the economy recover and provide people with a decent living.</p>
EURODIACONIA EUROCITIES ESN	Long-term unemployment (LTU): an integrated approach through multi-stakeholder cooperation.	LTU	<p>The topic: The devastating effect of the financial and economic crisis on European labour markets has created a challenge for social stakeholders and society at large. After several years of worsening labour market conditions, EU policy initiatives have provided new momentum to instruments which aim to get the long-term unemployed into jobs. These initiatives fully recognise the need to integrate labour market services with social services.</p> <p>The event: Long-term unemployment (LTU) constitutes one of the EU's most pressing economic and social challenges. LTU is exposing large numbers of citizens and their families to increased risks of hardship, poverty and social exclusion, which are only more likely to become chronic as joblessness extends over time. These issues provided the context for discussion. Participants were also inspired by the recent Council Recommendation on the integration of the long-term unemployed into the labour market. They agreed on the need to continue examining innovative, effective ways to provide both tailored and universal approaches to mitigating LTU. The event also showcased the added value of cooperation between different stakeholders.</p>
Knowledge Centre Social Europe	Accelerate to Independence	Addressing the needs of young people	<p>The topic: A considerable number of homeless and long-term unemployed people lived in care institutions when they were young. Too often, not enough attention is paid to young people as they make the transition from institutional care to independence. This is not necessarily about the quality of care, but of ineffective guidance as they make the journey to young adulthood. Therefore, a structured and mandatory policy of after-care is required to prevent these young people falling into structural homelessness after they leave their institutional residences.</p> <p>The event: The event examined ways in which the risk of structural homelessness can be tackled and prevented. In addition, policy recommendations from the local, regional, national and European level were presented and discussed. These recommendations were based on in-depth interviews conducted in focus groups with young care leavers from Italy, Austria and Belgium. Event content and related questions were inspired by the Erasmus+ and Youth KA2-project 'Accelerate to independence', which focused on delivering after-care mechanisms in the youth care sector.</p>

➤ Speed dating: Putting social projects in the spotlight

The Convention's 'speed dating' session provided participants with the opportunity to meet project innovators. The session proved to be a great way to exchange information and best practice about successful social inclusion initiatives from across Europe.

Those taking part shared a series of brief exchanges on the purpose, financing and outcomes of one of the showcased projects before moving to another table. The projects were selected according to their relevance to the theme of inclusive growth, as well as their proven impact, sustainability and transferability to other EU countries or sectors.



The following projects were presented:

Project description	Organiser	Country
Integration Strategy — A welcome package for asylum seekers, providing integration assistants at kindergartens and schools, cooperation with NGOs and orientation courses.	City of Graz	Austria
TAZ — An activation programme for jobseekers with severe medical, mental, psychological or psychiatric problems. Job and health coaches are available.	Public Employment Service Flanders	Belgium
Kofoed's School — Counselling, training, education, accommodation and social services for marginalised groups such as the long-term unemployed, homeless people, addicts, psychologically vulnerable individuals and migrants.	Kofoeds Skole — Copenhagen	Denmark
A tea with Adilah — Social support for immigrants: a labour and health orientation service for young migrant mothers.	Federazione SCS/Oratorio Santa Chiara Palermo	Italy
TRIADE — Training for Inclusion of Ageing People with Disabilities Through Exchange. The development of a training model for staff members who provide services to disabled elderly people.	vzw den achtkanter — Kortrijk	Belgium
UNGA Station (Young station) — Social services for young people, children and their families who may or may not have access to the national social security system.	Stockholm City Mission	Sweden

A detailed description of the projects can be found on the 2016 ACIG website: <http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=15326&langId=en>



➤ Afternoon Plenary: Reflecting on the key messages of the day

Michel Servoz (Director General — DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion) thought that the Annual Convention's revamped format worked much better than its previous incarnation. It is more interactive and dynamic, and the Commission will continue with this renewed civil dialogue in the coming months. He reflected on the many issues raised throughout the day, starting with the questions about the legal form of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The Pillar will be an instrument with binding force. The exact form of this instrument will be determined by the substance of the Pillar, but the Commission has several options at its disposal: Commission's recommendations, legislation, or country-specific recommendations issued through the European Semester. The Commission does not want to decide now, but it will look into providing a consultation on the issue.

Mr Servoz went on to say that the number of people at risk of poverty represents a huge loss of human capital and is an obstacle to economic growth. There must be a link between fighting poverty and delivering growth as they are two

sides of the same coin. He confirmed the importance of civil society input into the European Semester. The Commission listens to both civil society and national governments to get the right picture.

Roel Gans (Director for International Affairs — Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment) stressed that this Convention was a unique opportunity to listen to civil society.

He stated that convergence is necessary and noted that the social content of the European Semester has been increasing, providing a better balance with economic concerns. Benchmarks, peer reviews and exchanges of good practice need to be considered. He added that the Netherlands will devote time for discussions on the

Social Pillar in an informal EPSCO, and that fighting poverty is a high priority in the country. The Dutch approach to social benefits prioritises activating measures: providing a safety net is simply not enough.

Jana Hainsworth (President of the Social Platform) stressed that, while this new Convention



format is a step in the right direction, it is crucial to use such events to reach outside the civil society circle. Opportunities must be developed to listen to and interact with trade unions, employers and Member State governments.

Regarding the European Pillar of Social Rights, there are real concerns about whether it is really going to deliver social convergence: instead it could end up being a race to the bottom. The Pillar might also create a two-speed Europe as it focuses on the euro area. Ms Hainsworth pointed out another crucial issue: there is still no common language between civil society and funding mechanisms such as the European Investment Bank, the European Fund for Strategic Investments and the European Social Fund. This situation does not help organisations understand how the funds are being used, or how they can be accessed.

Sergio Aires (President of the European Anti-Poverty Network) started with a question: What is inclusive growth? He noticed that not all stakeholders were present in the discussions. The problem is still redistribution of wealth. If citizens are to believe in the European project, it is necessary to tackle the crisis and the unequal redistribution of wealth. He said it is difficult to persuade EU institutions that the views of people experiencing poverty really matter.



Montserrat Mir Roca (Confederal Secretary — European Trade Union Confederation) reminded the audience that, in the acquis, there are binding documents that the Pillar should implement. Challenges such as in-work poverty and minimum wages have still not been overcome. The aim should be to improve the quality of jobs. Modernisation often means wage reductions, cuts and consequently more people being put at risk of poverty. The needs of refugees must also be taken into account when framing social policy.

Rebekah Smith (Senior Advisor for Social Affairs — BUSINESSEUROPE) noted that the audience was mostly from civil society, whereas there should have been a greater variety of participants. The

Social Pillar should offer a dialogue at

EU level between different organi-

sations. Today we can see that

things are getting better: for

example, household incomes

are increasing, as are levels

of employment. But coun-

tries with higher inequalities

remain affected by the crisis.

She said that it is necessary to

continue with reforms to create

jobs for more people while

delivering appropriate levels of income. In particular,

adequate income support should be provided to

people transitioning from benefits to work. For the

economy to function well, social benefits must be

effective. The Pillar can help drive national reforms

and benchmarking.

➤ The Way Forward



Closing remarks were made by **Valdis Dombrovskis**, the European Commission's Vice-President for the Euro and Social Dialogue.

Mr Dombrovskis noted that this new Convention was born out of a joint will to develop stronger long-term solutions for fighting poverty, reducing unemployment and making sure no one is left behind.

Going forward, the Commission wants to further its dialogue with civil society in a structured and pragmatic way in order to respond to changing social needs. As Mr Dombrovskis stated: 'Stronger participation and a shared sense of collective responsibility are key to delivering our goal of a European Union worthy of a social Triple A.'

He highlighted the European Semester process to underline the importance of strong civil dialogue. The support of civil society and its European

umbrella organisations is indeed crucial to explain the Semester processes at national and regional level — and to involve society more broadly in the development of National Reform Programmes and the implementation of Country-Specific Recommendations.

The crisis has taken an enormous toll on European society, it is therefore more important than ever to concentrate on the Europe 2020 objectives for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth — in particular on the poverty headline target.

Mr Dombrovskis concluded the Convention by reminding the audience that reducing poverty is of course not exclusively a European task. Just recently the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda, which has the same aim and that makes sustainability the guiding principle. The Commission will fully engage with the UN in sharing experiences, building capacity and monitoring progress towards the new Sustainable Development Goals.

'While reform efforts in our Member States slowly begin to bear fruit — especially in the form of improved labour market conditions — we still have unacceptably high levels of unemployment and poverty, and the recovery, insofar as it is felt at all, is still fragile. As underlined in the Annual Growth Survey, we must work together to strengthen the recovery, making it more sustainable and accelerate the trend of upward convergence in our economies and society.'

VP Dombrovskis.

➤ Annex 1

Opening speech of Ms Marianne Thyssen *EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills & Labour Mobility*

Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to welcome you here today and indeed to kick off this first Convention for Inclusive Growth. I would also like to thank my Services for their excellent work in organising this Convention.

The Convention represents a firm commitment, on our part in the European Commission to reconnect policymaking at European level with your expertise and your work as civil society organisations.

The Convention signals also the new approach of this Commission to civil dialogue. By putting "Inclusive growth" at the forefront it highlights the importance of strengthening the social dimension of the EU in all its facets - by fighting poverty; by building societies that are more cohesive; by modernising social protection and promoting social investment; or by improving employment opportunities and activation.

This new approach builds on the lessons learnt to develop a flexible and output-oriented structure; our ambition for this Convention is to foster a greater engagement and deeper dialogue with all stakeholders active in social and employment issues.

Our aim is to make this dialogue more effective in working towards the Europe2020 targets for poverty and employment. We want a stronger, impact-oriented social Open Method of Coordination. We need to ensure that social is properly taken up in the European Semester.

Indeed, one of the main objectives of this Commission, as set by President Jean-Claude Juncker, is to create a Europe worthy of a 'Social Triple A'.

Some of you are asking what a 'Social Triple A' stands for. For me, there is no doubt: it is an ambition – indeed,

a commitment - that the economic strengthening of our Union goes hand-in-hand with improving people's lives. This is the core of the European Social Model and a vital component of our social market economy.

In my view, a 'triple A' social Europe requires fair and balanced growth that leads to equal opportunities and adequate protection for all throughout their life-cycle and the creation of decent, quality jobs.

This Commission has put fairness at the core of its agenda. I am convinced that it is only by ensuring that social considerations are better integrated in all EU policy areas that we will truly achieve a Social Europe.

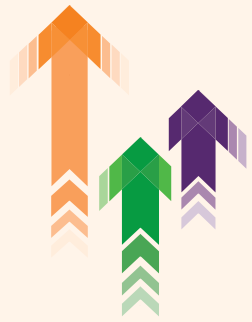
The Commission has already taken concrete steps to make sure Europe deserves a triple A rating. Allow me to mention some of them:

We immediately took actions to help young people, who were worst hit by the crisis, to improve their opportunities through the Youth Guarantee.

We issued guidance to get the long-term unemployed back to work and break the poverty and exclusion cycle. And we launched the Accessibility Act to allow disabled but also other people like the elderly to participate more fully in work and society.

Within the European semester, we have deepened the analysis of employment and social performance, also by adding three employment indicators to the scoreboard of the Alert Mechanism Report underpinning the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure.





We adopted a proposal for a European Accessibility Act, which will give persons with disabilities – and older people – more opportunities and choices in their everyday life.

Work is also underway in 2016 on a fresh start to promote work-life balance for working parents – both men and women.

And before summer we will present a European Skills Agenda to equip people in Europe with the right skills – with a lifelong learning perspective – to help them enter and move up in the labour market.

In parallel with these concrete initiatives, on the 8th of March we launched a broad consultation on a first concrete outline of the European Pillar of Social rights. President Juncker announced this initiative in his State of the Union address in September last year.

The consultation will collect stakeholders' views, including of national parliaments, the European Parliament, social partners and the civil society. The consultation outcome will form the basis for a Commission proposal for the Pillar early in 2017.

Why a pillar of Social rights? The European social model is a success story: the EU is today the largest economy in the world and its citizens enjoy very high living standards. Our social model has effectively contributed to the prosperity and the progress of our societies. It is indeed a fundamental element of our growth model: addressing inequalities and social disadvantage; opening up opportunities for all to participate in society and economy; acting as a buffer and stabilising the economy.

But it is also more than that: our Social Model and its values define the type of society we are, and aspire to be. These shared, European values have materi-

alised over time in a whole set of social rights, which are enshrined in national and European laws as well as fundamental rights.

At the same time we need to screen whether the European Social Model is still fit for purpose. We are confronted with long term challenges like globalisation, ageing society and changing work patterns. It is vital that we embrace and harness the opportunities that they offer. As it is vital to respond effectively to make sure that these new changes don't lead people on a path to precariousness.

We are also still confronted with the aftermath of the crisis. The crisis has exacerbated existing social problems. It has widened the disparities both between and within Member States. It has increased inequality in our societies; thrown too many families into poverty; made it difficult for young people to realise their potential on the job market; and has put our social protection systems under severe strain.

It's time for a reality check. Are our European Union and our Member State's policies in social affairs in the broad sense of the word still up to date? Are they fit-for purpose in the 21st century?

For this, we need a compass for renewed convergence, particularly within the Euro area. Our Economic and Monetary Union needs to become stronger and more stable, both economically and socially. This is what the Pillar of Social Rights is about.

The Pillar is built around three headings.

- The first heading is equal opportunities and access to the labour market
- The second is fair working conditions;
- And the third is about social rights in society.

Within these three headings, the Pillar sets out 20 areas of social rights - ranging from minimum income, childcare and housing to working conditions and work-life balance. Each domain contains a number of concrete principles, which are based on existing social rights.

These principles are considered essential for labour markets and welfare systems that are fair, inclusive and that function properly. They take account of economic and social considerations, of the wide diversity of situations in Europe, as well as the changing realities on the ground.

This debate is also taking place in international organisations: the future of work is being debated in Davos, in the OECD and at the ILO. It is important that we also take a comprehensive view in Europe. The problems are common and so are the solutions.

That is why this consultation is addressed to all Member States; but it is particularly important for the Eurozone. Reducing the heterogeneity of social and labour market policies is essential for the smooth functioning and stability of the Economic and Monetary Union. So, the Pillar of Social Rights will, in first instance, be for the Member States of the euro area, but other Member States are welcome to join. The debate is open to everyone.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The consultation we launched on 8 March aims to trigger a truly public debate on social values and rights. We need to discuss concretely how the European Social Model must adapt to the twenty first century and how we will achieve this.

Our aim is to reach out to all corners of Europe. And to involve as many people as possible, from all walks of life so that the Pillar is representative and realistic in the con-

text of a rapidly changing world. Finally, we want to hear from you – civil society in particular, and all our stakeholders. We want your views and your feedback on the outline of the Pillar. We want your opinions on its scope and content - with a view to strengthening the social dimension of Europe. We want to discuss the specific principles proposed and to explore the related challenges.

The consultation will remain open until the end of this year. I look forward to the debate that will surely follow.

Ladies and gentlemen,

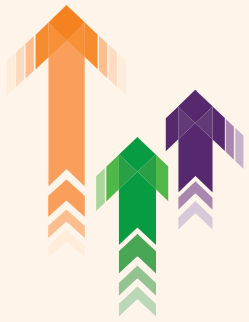
A core value of the European Union is its ability to respond to the global challenges that European societies and economies face. The legitimacy of the European Union lies in its ability to give credible answers to the real problems of people in Europe: the plight of people at risk of poverty, or of the unacceptably high numbers of youth and long-term unemployed in our Member States. Or of the growing divergences in our societies and the harmful effect this has on our potential recovery.

This is the reason why, we have set ourselves ambitious social goals in this Commission mandate. And why we put people at the heart of all we do. That is especially evident in the proposal we have put forward for a European Pillar of Social Rights, and in all the steps we take to achieve a social triple A for Europe.

As you will now hear from my colleague beside me, the Dutch Presidency of the Council also calls for more democratic legitimacy in European decision-making. Together, we urge your active involvement - as representatives of European citizens - in our policy response to the challenges of today and tomorrow. This is essential to ensure that their voice is heard and that their best interests are protected in a fast-changing world.

Thank you.

➤ Annex 2



Speech Annual Convention for Inclusive Growth

Jetta Klijnsma
21 March 2016

Good morning.

I should like to begin by thanking you, Ms Thyssen, for your kind words. I find it very positive that you put such emphasis on the *social* agenda as part of the *political* agenda. The organisation of this annual conference on inclusive growth only underlines that.

We should perhaps start the conference by taking a few moments to reflect on the subject we are going to be talking about. What exactly is inclusive growth? What do we want to grow towards? And what exactly will the journey entail?

In the Netherlands, children have a memory game called 'I'm going on holiday and I packed my suitcase with ...':

The idea is that each child in turn repeats the sentence and adds another item to the suitcase. Suntan cream, for example. Or a good book.

As the list gets longer and the suitcase fuller, so the game becomes more difficult. If you miss out one of the things packed, you are out.

Of course, it is nice to have a well-filled suitcase with you on holiday. But rather than suntan cream or a book, I prefer to take some good company with me.

And this is equally true for the journey that we, as a society, are making towards the future.

If we stop to consider the future, we want our life then to be better than it is now. With more pros-

perity, more jobs, more opportunities. To stay with the holiday theme: a tropical sandy beach with waving palm trees that we can dream about on a rainy day, in the here and now.

Growth and development are thus two of the things that we will want to have in our suitcase. But here too, the journey will only really be a pleasant one if we can make it together. So, nobody must be left behind, having to make do with just the holiday photos.

This is why I think it is so important that this conference is devoted to inclusive growth. Growth for everyone. Growth from which everyone benefits.

With employment, prosperity and opportunities for us all.

Only inclusive growth offers us a real future. After all, a society whose development is skewed can never be stable. It will lead to exclusion and disadvantage.

So the question is: how can we ensure that growth is inclusive?

The crux of the matter is that word: 'inclusive'. It is best to understand the word in its most inclusive sense, that is to say as 'all-inclusive'.

Inclusive growth means growth for everyone. This is why I am so pleased that today's agenda includes



not only employment but also topics such as poverty reduction. The two are connected and cannot be treated separately.

I would now like to discuss poverty reduction in somewhat greater depth.

At the beginning of 2010, I visited Madrid, for the launch of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. Also in 2010, all the EU Member States pledged to meet the Europe 2020 target of reducing poverty and social exclusion in Europe by 20 million people.

However, as a result of the financial crisis, the number has risen, not fallen, in recent years.

As we slowly claw our way out of the crisis, it is now time to turn the tide and do something about poverty in Europe. This is why I have made poverty reduction in the EU a priority during the Dutch Presidency.

We have to help one another tackle poverty and social exclusion as effectively as possible.

During the Presidency, I therefore want to promote the exchange of knowledge and best practices in the field of poverty reduction. Today's meeting gives me an excellent opportunity to do so.

I also intend to seek political attention for poverty reduction, by ensuring that Council conclusions are drafted on the subject. Those conclusions are currently being prepared by the Social Protection Com-

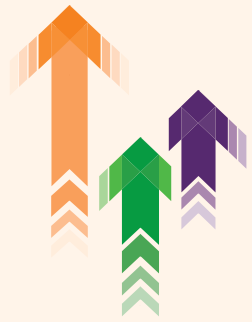
mittee, and are expected to be adopted by the EP-SCO Council in June this year.

I believe that poverty can best be tackled at local level, close to the people concerned, and with their involvement; by making a particular person or family the central element, and together with them identifying the problems and how they can best be solved.

Poverty can arise for all kinds of reasons, and have a variety of effects, touching different areas of life, such as work, healthcare, housing and education. If you don't have an income, for example, it is more likely that you won't be able to pay the rent or your healthcare bills. The problems thus mount up, and that is why an integrated approach, which takes account of all the different aspects of life, is necessary to reduce poverty.

Moreover, for an integrated approach to work, it is crucial for there to be good cooperation between all the parties involved, both public and private; civil society and NGOs. It is not only that each party has its own unique knowledge; each party can also approach the target group in its own, unique way. Each party thus holds a valuable piece of the complex puzzle that is poverty reduction.

As I look around the room today, I see that all pieces of the puzzle are well represented, but I would like to mention one in particular, the experts with expe-



rience of poverty, such as the European Anti Poverty Network (EAPN).

Those experts are people who live or have lived in poverty, and now, as professionals, help other people living in poverty.

I regard Belgium as a country engaging in 'best practice' as regards the involvement of experts with experience of poverty. It now has some 130 such experts working in social services, debt counselling and other bodies.

I have nothing but the greatest admiration for how those people have turned the setbacks in their lives into something positive.

Firstly, their personal growth, in obtaining work and an income as an expert, and secondly, the extremely valuable support they provide for people who need it. The knowledge of those with real experience of poverty has considerable added value.

As the Flemish expert Marleen Koch herself has said, *'I understand how difficult people's lives are. I can show my respect for what they have to say. Aid workers don't ask about how you feel. I missed that in my previous life.'*

A number of local authorities in the Netherlands are starting to use experts with experience of poverty in a similar way to Belgium, for which they are receiving financial assistance from Europe.

I myself have provided grants to the EAPN for practically-oriented research, currently on-going, into the use of experts with experience of poverty as part of poverty reduction policies in a number of local authorities.

The successful involvement of these experts shows how important it is to exchange knowledge within the EU and to share best practices in the field of poverty reduction with one another.

But their use is also a *model* for inclusive growth. Growth *for* everyone, but also *involving* everyone. You can't get more inclusive than that.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In our journey to the future, it is not so much a matter of taking as many things with us as possible as of taking as many people as possible.

I want to travel to a society with opportunities for all. A society in which everyone benefits from prosperity. With growth for and involving all of us.

That is the *all-inclusive* destination that I want to go to. Let's confirm our travel plans today!

Thank you.

➤ Annex 3

Concluding remarks of Mr Valdis Dombrovskis *Vice-President for the Euro and Social Dialogue.*

Director-General,

*Honourable representatives of civil society
organisations*

Ladies and gentlemen,

What unites all of us present here today is a belief that we can, and must, move towards a more social Europe.

This is not the first, and not the only time we have a debate on how to achieve this. Indeed, the European Commission, including Commissioner Thyssen and myself, and Commission's services via DG EMPL, have made it a point to meet with civil society organisations on a regular basis. Your views are important, your groundwork is essential, to move ahead.

Yet there is some additional value in this format, in that it makes civil dialogue more focused, and more effective. We want to include your views when and where real decisions are taken, so that they are truly able to shape policies. Coming together in this format - with all involved in preparing, making and implementing decisions - gives this debate a real edge.

It is an important debate, especially at a time when economic recovery is moderate and growth not inclusive enough: gaps between Member States and within Member States have widened since the crisis, and current growth trends remain insufficient to close them. So policies need to be further adjusted.

Moving towards "inclusive growth" means we give an extra push on issues like addressing poverty, creating employment opportunities, improving employability and activation for the most vulnerable.

We have already taken measures in this regard, for example by stronger focus on labour market and social issues in the European Semester.

This first edition of our Annual Convention was born from our common ambition to take it one step further: to develop long-term solutions to improve Europe's social dimension by fighting against poverty, reducing unemployment and, more broadly, building societies that are more cohesive.

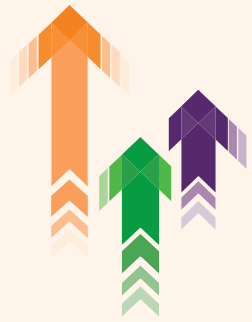
That is the starting point for the discussion on the European Pillar of Social Rights – and today gave us the chance to reflect on how we can all play a part in shaping this agenda.

You have seen our proposal in the outline of the Pillar on equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions and adequate and sustainable social protection. You now have the opportunity to reflect on how this can bring about upward labour market and social convergence.

I have not been able to attend the whole programme, but I know that this Convention already sparked many interesting reflections on this. The outcome of your discussions will feed into the ongoing public consultation. With your input, we are hoping to develop a strong European Pillar of Social Rights, focused on the real needs of today's context and the challenges of tomorrow's economy.

Going forward, our dialogue will be focused on the political priorities of this Commission as much as





possible, so that input is more targeted and timely and can really influence policy making.

The explicit aim of this is better and stronger involvement of civil society. This allows the Commission to sharpen its analysis of the economic and social situation, and make the best use of your knowledge and expertise at grassroots level.

Stronger participation and a shared sense of responsibility are key to delivering on our goal for inclusive and fairer European Union.

All of us here agree on the need for a structured and pragmatic civil dialogue that responds to changing social needs and developments in the global economy, but also to technological breakthroughs and societal evolutions that change the nature of work.

We must work together at all levels – with our Member States and stakeholders at European and national level – to make sure that we grow closer together rather than drift further apart; that we apply the best policy practices to promote productivity and fairness; ultimately, that we preserve and strengthen our European social models.

For the EU to prosper, labour markets and welfare systems need to function well and fairly everywhere in Europe. The new Commission immediately started to rebalance the Union's economic governance so that social considerations are taken into account together with the economic ones.

Greater emphasis is now placed on employment and social issues in the European Semester. We have also added three specific indicators to the Alert

Mechanism Report underpinning the Macroeconomic Imbalances Procedure.

Building resilient economies and societies, based on the right mix of policies and institutions, is essential. That way, we ensure that – rather than a race to the bottom – convergence is a positive process that improves competitiveness and social standards for all Member States.

Civil dialogue helps the Commission to identify emerging issues, but also to create greater awareness of EU policy implementation at national and regional level. This is especially the case for the European Semester process: the support of social partners and civil society and their European umbrella organisations is crucial to support reforms for more inclusive labour markets and fairer welfare systems at national and regional level; and to involve society more broadly into the development of National Reform Programmes and in implementing relevant Country-Specific Recommendations.

The work on revamping the European Semester will continue.

Our focus is now on ways to strengthen the democratic accountability and legitimacy of the Semester. In this sense, we are working towards improving the consultation and involvement of national Parliaments, and stakeholders – such as civil society – in the whole process. We also call on Member States to involve stakeholders at all levels in the national process.

The involvement of civil society is also crucial to reach our Europe 2020 objectives for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

The crisis has taken an enormous toll on our societies. We have been thrown off course on reducing poverty. Inequality and growing divergences in and between Member States remain a major challenge to tackle. Now, more than ever, we need to focus on the delivery of the Strategy. Looking back at the crisis, it is clear that sustainable economic, financial and fiscal policies must be part and parcel of this endeavour.

The fight against poverty is of course not exclusively a European one. Recently the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda also with this aim in mind, while making sustainability the guiding principle. The EU played an important role here and the

Commission will fully engage with the UN in experience sharing, capacity building, and monitoring of progress. We have already started a mapping exercise between the EU-2020 targets and these new Sustainable Development Goals.

For us to continue to play that role, we need to show the world we can lead from up front: that our social model is still an inspiration and an aspiration for other societies – as it is for ours.

It's ambitious, but it's possible.

So let's work together in that effort.

Thank you very much.

Useful links

Convention website:

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=88&eventId=1087&further>

European Pillar of Social Rights:

http://ec.europa.eu/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/towards-european-pillar-social-rights_en

DG EMPL Publications:

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=93>

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/e-newsletter>



<https://www.facebook.com/socialeurope>



https://twitter.com/EU_Social

DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

1049 Brussels

Belgium

E-Mail: EMPL-ACIG@ec.europa.eu