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The Social Dimension of the Lisbon Treaty

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Thank you for your invitation to participate in this panel discussion on "the implementation of the social dimension of the Lisbon Treaty".

The Treaty of Lisbon has brought about radical changes which strengthen the EU's social achievements and develop them further, in full respect of national prerogatives. Lisbon bears a positive impact making the EU more democratic, transparent and effective.

On perusing the consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union, we note that the Treaty:

- preserves existing rights while introducing new ones, such as respect for human dignity, equality between men and women and minority rights.
- contains a social clause, exhibiting the determination of the Union to combat social exclusion and discrimination, and to promote social justice.
- makes reference, to the Union's contribution to peace, security, sustainable development, as well as to solidarity, mutual respect among peoples, the eradication of poverty and the protection of human rights - particularly those of children.

These EU objectives shape a wide range of policy areas that have a global political influence. They are also in line with the eight Millennium Development Goals, set up by the United Nations in 2000 to eradicate world poverty by 2015, with the aim of saving the lives of millions worldwide.

With the Lisbon Treaty coming into force, we are entering into a new era in EU global political influence and development - one in which Member states are called to coordinate their policies more closely. The Treaty of Lisbon elevates economic and social objectives on an equal footing, stating that: "The Union shall work for the sustainable development of Europe, based on balanced economic growth and price stability and a highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress".

The Treaty's recognition of the Charter of Fundamental Rights is another key point which gives provisions for a binding legal force (cultural, religious and linguistic diversity, right of collective bargaining and action, protection in the event of unjustified dismissal, fair and just working conditions, prohibition of child labour, social security and social assistance etc).

Moreover the Lisbon Treaty adds a whole new dimension of participatory democracy to the European Union next to that of representative democracy, on which the Union is founded. Referring specifically to the European Citizen's Initiative, we underline the significant role this new instrument plays in providing a minimum of one million citizens from a range of Member States with the right to call on the Commission to bring forward new policy proposals. In this way the European Citizen's Initiative fosters greater cross-border public debate about EU policy issues and unites different people for a unique and common purpose.

It is true that the recent global economic and social crisis has yielded increasing unemployment and more intense inequality and poverty. It has put solidarity and social justice within our societies, at risk.

As members of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, we strongly believe that: "The EU must not only tackle this crisis of historic dimensions but it must take this unprecedented opportunity to achieve transformational change in our economies, leading the way for truly sustainable and socially long-term development.

We know that European citizens, have a clear vision of what kind of society they want. For most of them, the core objectives of the EU 2020 would surely include:

1. A new deal for sustainability
2. High quality full employment with decent work and social inclusion for women and men
3. A fight against poverty, inequality and insecurity
4. A high-productivity knowledge economy
5. Social and territorial cohesion
6. Shaping a fair globalization that benefits all"

This vision imposes on politicians and decision-makers an historic responsibility to design an appropriate policy framework by including these core issues in the EU 2020 strategy, because as our political group declares: "We can no more separate economic strategies from a wider vision of society, because that approach has led to a society reshaped in the interests of the economy - increasingly unequal, insecure and fragile".

Instead, we should focus not only on rates of growth and employment, but also on how growth can help build a better, fairer society, a more sustainable economy and a more secure prosperity for all. In so doing, the involvement of regional and local government, the social partners and other social actors in the fulfilment and support of the objectives of the Lisbon strategy, must be enhanced.

We need to get from theory to practice and into the implementation of these policies. This necessitates better coordination with different national parliaments, correct use of evaluation mechanisms, continuous improvement of national legislations, fruitful cooperation between decision-makers, civil society and NGOs and the development of global partnerships.

The Lisbon Treaty provides a more democratic approach to EU decision-making via strengthened participation of the European parliament and national parliaments.

In times of economic and social crisis, it is, in my opinion, essential to take up the Working document of the European Commission on the future "EU 2020" strategy, the fundamental rights and values, as laid out in the Treaty of Lisbon. We need a strong economy with a renewed agenda. We need a truly ecological and a new social economy, supported by a new social agenda that will allow all citizens to benefit from growth and the fight against all forms of inequalities.

As European churches along with their related networks and ecumenical organisations, have always expressed their commitment and responsibility towards the well-being of people in Europe, as such, their contributions to the revision of the European employment strategies and the Social Agenda are most welcome.
