



Working towards a more inclusive and balanced European Semester: a model for civil society and trade union involvement

Jean Lambert MEP (Greens, UK) opened the event reflecting on the European Parliamentary Week (EPW) held earlier this month which discussed the European Semester. The meeting produced a booklet on EPW. From the discussion today, Ms. Lambert expected to hear concrete proposals on what can be done and to find out what can be entrenched before the next Parliament mandate in terms of engaging civil society and trade unions in the European Semester.

For **Marije Cornelissen MEP (Greens, NL)** the European Semester was flawed from the start, with only economic criteria being taken into account. To make the Semester work better for Member States, more attention to what civil society and trade unions have to say is necessary.

Civil society has a lot to offer, in particular, in terms of data. If citizens are demanding of politicians to act in Member States, then this will positively influence how they act. At the moment an ad-hoc alliance exists, however it is still not very structural and needs to be more embedded to be effective.

Ms. Cornelissen noted the disparities between Member States on civil society engagement. There are regular roundtables in certain countries, and in others, nothing at all. The Commission needs play a role in fostering civil society. For example, in the women's rights realm, the UN asks for regular civil society reports on the implementation of CEDAW. This model could be copied by the European Commission to ask civil society for yearly or two-yearly shadow reports on the Semester.

Ms. Cornelissen also sees trade unions as an important tool to get public support. However, the reaction of the unions on the Semester – which they view as encroaching on their remit – has been disappointing. Ms. Cornelissen calls on unions to choose to be involved or not, but underlines these processes will go forward with or without their involvement.

The MEP would also like to see more collective bargaining at European level. Social partners need to be more involved with a stronger role to set bandwidth for collective bargaining in minimum wages, once again to address the disparities across Member States.



For **Klaus Heeger, Secretary General of the European Confederation of Independent Trade Unions**, the challenge is to sell the European Semester – to help people understand and support it. Convincing each Member organisation to understand the importance of the European Semester is crucial. However, the more we look at the processes, the less we seem to understand. More engagement will only be possible through simplification. On the content of the new proposals from the European Commission on ‘social scoreboard’, Mr Heeger raised concerns on how these new indicators will lead to a reform policy that will focus on more social cohesion in practice. In addition, the notion of strengthening social dialogue needs to be better addressed in practice, with trade union pluralism being enhanced.

Heather Roy, Secretary General of Eurodiaconia, posed the question, what is stakeholder engagement? Ms. Roy addressed the assumption that civil society is automatically part of the “stakeholders” group. However, while social partners were invited to present an annex to the Annual Growth Survey, civil society was not. Ms. Roy wants to see better defined and more stakeholder involvement. In National Reform Programs for example, there should be proper and full evaluation of how stakeholders have been involved. Civil society engagement is not an optional extra but essential for policy ownership and successful implementation.

Heather Roy agreed that there is an issue around the need to simplify the process of the European Semester – and in particular wanted to look at questions of timing, when is civil society invited to participate. Real, meaningful stakeholder engagement will look at challenges of the process, the (limited) timing and the proper defining of the term stakeholder. For the Europe 2020 review, it is also important to measure how well has it proceeded in terms of delivering on its promises.

Jean-Paul Tricart, Head of Social Dialogue Unit at the European Commission conceded that while there is evidence of success in terms of coordination of policies, the same cannot be said for communication. It was good to have convinced Member States to think the same way around policy areas, but there has been a problem of communication and a problem in involving some stakeholders. The more complex a process, the more difficult it is to involve stakeholders.

On the involvement of social partners – the cross industry social partners – there was an October meeting on the overall orientation of the Annual Growth Survey, 1 month before the AGS was published. Mr Tricart pointed to some difficulties of practical involvement in terms of languages, time, and meaningful consultation.



Mr Tricart also said that Europe is in a contradictory situation – everyone recognises that wages cannot only be considered at national level, as there is clearly interaction. Yet, the Treaties are not even clear.

The representative from the Commission concluded by pointing out that social dialogue and civil society are differently structured – but it is true that European Semester impacts on areas in which civil society is engaged such as inclusion and poverty.

The **Chair of the European Parliament's Employment and Social Affairs Committee, Pervenche Berès**, briefly attended the seminar. Ms. Berès pointed out that this is a debate which is still on the table but commented that addressing how to engage civil society is extremely difficult. Offering words of encouragement, Ms. Berès urged civil society and trade unions not to give up on this debate on engaging in the European Semester.

Discussing the Tripartite Summit, it was for the EMPL Chair a fake dialogue, purely formal. In this context, an update of social partner involvement is needed. In a future plenary resolution on the state of play – the European Parliament will be the advocates of trade unions. The Economic and Financial Affairs Committee will also work on the question of social dialogue with social partners on the Working Time Directive.

As **Policy coordinator at the European Anti-Poverty Network, Sian Jones** was well placed to represent civil society in discussion. Ms. Jones believed civil society must be there and stakeholder engagement is not an add-on – society needs it and the EU needs it. For Ms. Jones, the semester is the driving process for everything at EU level.

However, the EAPN coordinator said that it had had devastating effects with poverty having increased by 8.7 million – a massive failure. Civil society is needed for better policies and for credibility – with the EU currently struggling to be able to sell the process. In terms of engagement with civil society, Ms. Jones pointed to the Treaties which state regular, structured dialogue should take place.

Ms. Jones saw this as an opportunity to work together to come up with demands and as an opportunity to drive forward towards more engagement.

Katharina Wegner from Diakonie Deutschland Brussels Office brought a national perspective to the table. Ms. Wegner opened by drawing from the strong tradition in Germany of civil society, but nonetheless noted that it was not easy to be involved in the European Semester.



In Germany, as in other countries, it is the Ministry for Economic Affairs which is mainly in charge of with the European Semester. Diakonie together with other German welfare associations has a regular dialogue every year with the German government on the National Reform Programme, however with the ministry for Employment and Social Affairs. In 2013, for the first time, two representatives from the Ministry for Economic Affairs were present. Thus, progress is very slow. The social partners are, every year, invited to meet with the Ministry for Economic Affairs, but this seems to be rather unproductive and similar to the comments from Ms. Berès, not wholly genuine. Katharina Wegner pointed out that it is even more important for countries with less of a tradition of dialogue between government and civil society to have guidelines on the civil society involvement in the European Semester.

Jean Lambert MEP picked up on this last point before opening the debate to the floor, noting that there are very different traditions of civil society involvement in EU countries.

Anne Wagenführ from Deutscher Caritasverband e.V. took the opportunity to call for a stop the 'secret language' surrounding economic policy coordination, a language which the national level simply does not understand. For Caritas, timing is also a key issue with more time being needed. 15 working days is a minimum for a consultation on guidelines. Deutscher Caritasverband e.V also wants to see Country Specific Recommendations also for programme countries.

Klaus Müller from the Representation of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia to the European Union took the floor to mention capacity building and structural funds.

Sarah King, Policy Adviser at the ETUC, also contributed to the debate, calling the process of the European Semester exclusive and complex. Nonetheless, it is a process which social partners have been trying hard to get involved in. The ETUC supports the fact that other stakeholders need to be involved and in its position the ETUC is not just advocating policies for member organisations, but for all workers – in this context unity is our strength. Ms King noted that a goal for the ETUC is raising awareness of European Semester.

Jean Lambert MEP (Greens) concluded the debate by reminding participants of the upcoming elections, with the turnover of MEPs set to be 50% and upwards. This means civil society and trade unions will have a great deal of work to do in taking these issues to new mandate with the hope of improving the process to create a more open and inclusive European Semester.