

Social Developments in the European Union 2009
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(www.ose.be/EN/agenda_archives.htm)

Introduction by Bart Vanhercke
Administrative director, European Social Observatory (OSE)

Ladies and gentlemen,
Mesdames et messieurs,
Dames en heren,

First of all a warm welcome is in order to all of you – and I see you have come in *great numbers*. We are lucky that the European Economic and Social Committee was so kind to disclose an additional meeting room so that we can seat everyone. I would very much like to thank the EESC for their hospitality, which included interpretation in three languages.

There may seem to be some irony in organizing a conference on “Social developments in the EU” at a time when a severe economic crisis is raging out there. The prospects for social Europe never seemed so bleak. At the same time however, it is clear that this situation of permanent austerity – which is there to stay for the foreseeable future - begs us to rethink some of the EU policy instruments and objectives. I dare to say that in such a context, a think tank like the OSE - providing critical analyses and tools for policymakers - is even more needed than was the case before.

It goes without saying that we cannot undertake such a challenge ‘on our own’. For that reason the new duo directorship of the OSE is more than happy that we do not simply have a ‘full house’ today.

We have a house full of friends today!

I see representatives of the OSE’s ‘traditional’ partners such as Belgian, Italian and European Trade Union organizations. But I also bumped into scholars and students of European integration from different Belgian and European universities and think tanks. We’ve had the pleasure of are working with some of you in the context of the Sixth and Seventh framework Programmes as well as academic Networks of Excellence such RECWOWE and ETOS.be. I also spotted a fine sample of civil servants in the room, working in European, national, regional *and* local administrations. Our collaboration with the Belgian INAMI and ministries for Social Security and Employment goes a long way back. And I’m sure it has a bright future.

It is probably 'typical' for an OSE gathering that the administrator from the European Commission and the social assistant of some Brussels community sit next to one another, and share their temporary social space with members of EMCO, the SPC or another EU committee. And I should not forget those of you who represent their minister for social affairs, employment or health, or the Permanent Representations of your country. Finally, I'm glad to see that different 'waves' of former OSE colleagues as well as trainees from a variety of Belgian, European and North American universities, have found their way to the Van Maerlant-building today.

I cannot stress sufficiently how valuable it is for the European Social Observatory that we continue to be surrounded by such a large network of supporters.

I'm pretty sure that the founding fathers of the OSE – some of whom are here today – share that joy with us. To Albert Carton, Franco Chittolina, Felice Dassèto, Gérard Fonteneau, Emilio Gabaglio, Pierre Jonckheer and the consecutive Secretary Generals of the Christian confederation of trade unions ("la CSC") I say this: if the OSE is alive and kicking today, it is because we are able to stand on your shoulders. We are more than grateful for the legacy you have passed on to us, and we will handle it with care. A very special goes of course to Philippe Pochet, who has been director at the OSE for 20 years. We are only beginning to realize what you have achieved.

Le constat à faire est que les amis de l'OSE travaillent dans autant de domaines que ceux qui sont couverts par les travaux de recherche et de formation de l'Observatoire. D'autres domaines de recherches, tels que l'éducation, le dialogue social sectoriel ou encore les emplois verts - sont moins développés pour l'instant et méritent un investissement de notre part, comme l'expliquera mon co-directeur David Natali dans un instant.

Apart from the obvious substantive reasons to deal with these 'new' issues, there is an equally fascinating "governance" dimension which makes them worth studying. I am referring to the increasing acknowledgement that saying *anything* meaningful about the Europeanisation of these policy areas requires at least three things.

First, there is the need to study how a *variety of policy instruments* – such as EU legislation, social dialogue, EU funding and open coordination – interact with each other in a given policy area.

Secondly, it seems pointless to study 'social Europe' in isolation from larger frameworks such as the internal market and economic integration, including the Stability and Growth Pact.

Thirdly, studying the Europeanisation of social policy obviously begs for a reflection on the way the *EU* influences *domestic* policies, but *also* on the reverse sequence. We need to know a lot more about the mechanisms which Member States *and* stakeholders alike use when they try to influence the EU decision-making process.

New research themes need to be addressed; and new stable partnerships need to be developed with EU and domestic institutions, so that the OSE can continue to play its role as a critical think tank.

The challenges are huge. But I am confident that we can face them.

Those of you who read this year's edition of the 'Social Developments in the EU', know that the applied research is 'state of the art'. She or he that recently downloaded an 'OSE Working Paper' or other research product from the renewed website, probably reached the same conclusion. And I would gladly invite those who still need convincing, to subscribe to one of our Newsletters or to attend an OSE Lunchtime Session some time soon.

You can then find out for yourself how Anna, Cécile, Dalila, Igor, Paolo, Rita and Ramon manage to keep up the high research and training standards we all got used to. And how Benoit, Dominique, Renaud - and recently Pascal - provide the essential administrative and technical support to make it all happen. A very special thanks is in order to Françoise: in a way she *is* the OSE.

Before we embark on the future challenges, it is high time to look back now... and to kick-start the presentation of the book. [The bad news is that we are bit behind on our schedule]. The good news, however, is that Philippe Pochet, now General Director at the European Trade Union Institute, is not afraid of such temporal challenges. So I leave you in his able hands, and hope we can end our deliberations at a reasonable point in time ... for drinks.