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REPORT

on analysis of the open coordination procedure in the field of employment and social affairs, and future prospects
(2002/2223(INI))

Committee on Employment and Social Affairs

Rapporteur: Miet Smet

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PROCEDURAL PAGE

At the sitting of 21 November 2002 the President of Parliament announced that the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs had been authorised to draw up an own-initiative report, pursuant to Rule 163 of the Rules of Procedure, on analysis of the open coordination procedure in the field of employment and social affairs, and future prospects.

At the sitting of 19 December 2002 the President of Parliament announced that the Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities had been asked for its opinion.

The Committee on Employment and Social Affairs had appointed Miet Smet rapporteur at its meeting of 12 June 2002.

It considered the draft report at its meetings of 20 February, 19 March and 23/24 April 2003.

At the last meeting it adopted the motion for a resolution by 27 votes to 3, with 1 abstention.

The following were present for the vote: Theodorus J.J. Bouwman (chairman), Winfried Menrad (vice-chairman), Marie-Thérèse Hermange (vice-chairman), Miet Smet (rapporteur), Jan Andersson, Regina Bastos, Johanna L.A. Boogerd-Quaak (for Elspeth Attwooll), Hans Udo Bullmann (for Enrico Boselli), Philip Bushill-Matthews, Proinsias De Rossa, Harald Ettl, Carlo Fatuzzo, Ilda Figueiredo, Fiorella Ghilardotti (for Alejandro Cercas), Anne-Karin Glase, Stephen Hughes, Karin Jöns, Ioannis Koukiadis (for Elisa Maria Damião), Elizabeth Lynne, Toine Manders (for Daniel Ducarme), Thomas Mann, Mario Mantovani, Claude Moraes, Juan Andrés Naranjo Escobar (for Luigi Cocilovo), Manuel Pérez Álvarez, Bartho Pronk, Herman Schmid, Gabriele Stauner (for Enrico Ferri), Helle Thorning-Schmidt, Ieke van den Burg, Barbara Weiler and Sabine Zissener (for Roger Helmer).

The opinion of the Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities is attached.

The report was tabled on 30 April 2003.

MOTION FOR A RESOLUTION

European Parliament resolution on analysis of the open coordination procedure in the field of employment and social affairs, and future prospects (2002/2223(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the European Union treaties and, in particular, Articles 126 and 128 of the TEC,
- having regard to the treaty signed in Nice on 26 February 2001 and, in particular, Declaration No 23 on the future of the Union,
- having regard to the Laeken European Summit of 15 December 2001 Declaration on the future of the European Union¹,
- having regard to its resolution of 13 April 2000 and its proposals for the Intergovernmental Conference²,
- having regard to its resolution of 31 May 2001 on the Nice Treaty and the future of the European Union³,
- having regard to the Commission's White Paper on European governance (COM(2001) 428),
- having regard to the conclusions of the Lisbon European Council, which called on the Commission, the Council and the Member States to formulate, by 2001, a strategy for further coordinated action to simplify the regulatory environment, including the performance of public administration, at both national and Community level,
- having regard to the conclusions of the high-level group of experts set up on 7 November 2000 in Strasbourg by the European ministers responsible for public administration, which was involved in drawing up the strategy referred to by the Lisbon European Council,
- having regard to its resolution of 26 October 2000⁴ on the Commission reports to the European Council on 'Better law-making 1995: a shared responsibility' and 'Better law-making 1999',
- having regard to the opinion of the Committee of the Regions of 14 December 2000 on 'New forms of governance: Europe, a framework for citizens' initiative'⁵,
- having regard to the Commission's interim report of 7 March 2001 to the Stockholm European Council on 'Improving and simplifying the regulatory environment' (COM(2001) 130),

¹ Presidency conclusions - Annex I.

² OJ C 40, 7.2.2001, p. 409.

³ OJ C 47E, 21.2.2002, p. 6.

⁴ OJ C 197, 12.7.2001, p. 433.

⁵ CoR 182/2000.

- having regard to the summaries of the proceedings of the Convention and the final reports of the working groups on economic and social policy, the simplification of legislation, complementary competencies and ‘Social Europe’,
 - having regard to Rule 163 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs and the opinion of the Committee on Women’s Rights and Equal Opportunities (A5-0143/2003),
- A. whereas, since the Lisbon European Council, the open method of coordination has been applied to a whole series of subjects relating primarily to the field of employment and social affairs, such as social protection, immigration and asylum, social exclusion, health services, pensions, lifelong education and training, enterprise policy, meeting the challenge of demographic ageing, etc.,
 - B. whereas, according to the Lisbon European Council conclusions, applying the open method of coordination should make it possible to disseminate best practice and ensure greater convergence of national policies towards the main EU goals,
 - C. whereas the purpose of the open method of coordination is not to achieve harmonisation but some measure of compatibility, homogeneity or convergence in the results of long-term policies through a process of mutual learning; and whereas the open method of coordination is just one possible means of action and not intended to replace legislative work,
 - D. whereas the Treaty explicitly provides for the application of the OMC only for the formulation of the European employment strategy; whereas there are more or less developed OMCPs (open method of coordination processes) in other policy areas; the areas of European governance where the application of such a method of governance is to be preferred to the other executive instruments at the Union’s disposal are not specified by the Treaty, by other regulatory provisions, or by an interinstitutional agreement, and whereas any decision to apply that method is taken on a case-by-case basis by the Council acting on a proposal from the Commission or on its own initiative,
 - E. noting a progressive switch in the European decision-making process from traditional legislative work to new methods of working in areas where the legislative approach is inappropriate,
 - F. taking it as read that the European Parliament is the only institution which is capable, at European level, of exercising democratic control over political processes, including the open method of coordination,
 - G. noting that the European Parliament, the guarantor of democratic debate, is at risk of being marginalised or sidelined by these new political procedures,
 - H. whereas the role of the European Parliament in relation to the procedure known as the open method of coordination is unspecified, with only the European employment strategy including a provision for Parliament to be formally consulted,

- I. whereas, even in that instance, Parliament's role is considerably constrained by the time limits attached to the procedure,
 - J. whereas not only the European Parliament but also the national parliaments must be given due influence and responsibility in the OMCPs,
 - K. whereas there is a dearth of general surveys of the effectiveness of the method in achieving both the long-term objective of national policy coordination and the procedure's short-term objectives, namely: exchanging good practice, assessing national policy, setting targets and responding to Commission recommendations,
 - L. whereas, according to various experts, the global impact of the open method of coordination is determined by the degree of coordination required at Union level in each area, the groupings through which national interests are represented and the ability of the national authorities to bring national policy into line with the prescribed European strategy,
 - M. whereas the Convention's four working groups on the simplification of legislation, the Union's complementary competencies, economic and social policies and 'Social Europe' have stressed the need for the method to be more precisely specified, and for the method to be incorporated in the Constitutional Treaty,
 - N. whereas the Convention's Presidium has submitted an initial draft constitutional treaty, Title III of which defines Union competencies and actions, with Articles 11, 12 and 13 respectively indicating the areas in which the Union may lead the way or support coordinated action involving the Member States and the sectors where the Member States will be able to cooperate, while Title V should specify the instruments for such cooperation,
 - O. attaching just as much importance to an open and flexible approach, so that the open method of coordination is adaptable to different policy fields and to future developments in the EU,
- 1. Considers that it is necessary for the Convention to address the question of the application of the open method of coordination; calls on the Convention to examine the question of defining the field of application of the open method of coordination as compared to other Community instruments while setting out its general objectives in the new treaty;
 - 2. Calls for the Constitutional Treaty to include an article specifically relating to the open coordination method and stipulating that:
 - the application of the open method of coordination to any given policy must be decided on a Commission proposal after the European Parliament and the Council have given their approval; the Commission proposal must be accompanied by a description of the techniques and methods to be used, indicating the components of the method that will be used;

- the principal components of the method are: the setting of common targets, guidelines and common indicators, a timetable, the submission at regular intervals of a summary report on the strategy followed, which should summarise and analyse the national reports, and the formulation of recommendations;
 - Parliament must be formally consulted and the Economic and Social Committee should give an opinion on the guidelines, the summary report and the recommendations; the social partners must be consulted on matters relating to labour market and social policy;
 - each national report must indicate how representatives of civil society, including the social partners, and local, regional and national authorities, including the Parliament, have been consulted;
 - the recommendations must be lodged with the relevant parliaments within the Member States, and the recommendations must be accompanied by the European Parliament's report;
3. Calls on the Commission to draw up a study on the effectiveness of the method, which should examine:
- the various stages of the procedure and the role played by all those involved, including the debate in the national parliaments, the consultation of the local and regional authorities and of the social partners;
 - the extent to which the various players' views, including the European Parliament's, are taken into account in the guidelines;
 - the comparability of Member States' reports, and the effectiveness of quantitative targets and dissemination of good practice;
 - the impact of the open method of coordination on national policies, looking not only at efforts made and results obtained, but also into the causal link between the application of the open method of coordination and the adjustment of national policy;
4. Calls on the Commission to analyse the possibility of linking the making available of money from the Structural Funds with the performance of the Member States within the recommendations that have been made, and doing so in a positive way;
5. Notes that the open coordination method tends to favour the proliferation of the preparatory formations and forums known collectively as 'committees'; takes the view, in this connection, that the formal establishment of a high-level working party responsible for equal opportunities issues, made up of representatives/experts of the Member States, the social partners and NGOs, could help to bring a good level of expertise to the framing, implementation and follow-up of equal opportunities policy; takes the view that the Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities should be fully involved and consulted, in order to guarantee the democratic legitimacy of the open coordination method;

6. Is aware of current trends and wishes to safeguard democratic debate by, for example:
 - organising debates with the relevant committees of the parliaments of the Member States with a view to probing in depth into developments and discussions in the Member States;
 - regularly inviting representatives of the Employment Committee, the Social Protection Committee, and the Economic Policy Committee to in-depth discussions of developments related to European coordination and in the Member States;
 - organising discussions with the social partners at European level on applying the open method of coordination in specific areas;
 - disseminating the necessary information through the Internet for each adjustment of the open coordination method;
7. Calls on the Council and the Commission to take greater account of the European Parliament's observations when establishing guidelines; calls on the Commission and the Council to ensure the European Parliament has the necessary time to draw up informed and high-quality opinions; the European Parliament undertakes to ascertain whether it would be appropriate to adjust its practices and procedures to its role as a democratic and proactive participant in the open method of coordination;
8. Calls on the Council, the Commission and Parliament to ensure that the application of the open method of coordination:
 - does not serve as a fig leaf for a country's failure to take action;
 - cannot be used as a means of replacing more binding forms of Community regulation, for the express purpose of avoiding such regulation and, at the same time, undermining the whole concept of the European Social Model;
9. Notes that, given that the open coordination method (OCM) is intended to be applied to a series of areas having direct implications for women, including the European strategy on employment and the policy for combating social exclusion, it is necessary to include the dimension of equal opportunities for men and women and gender mainstreaming at all levels of formalisation of this new policy management instrument;
10. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the parliaments of Member States and the Economic and Social Committee; in view of the debate currently taking place in the Convention, also asks for the resolution to be forwarded to the President of the Convention.

EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

The open method of coordination

The open method of coordination prescribed by the Lisbon European Council closely followed the pattern set by Articles 126 and 128 of the Treaty establishing the European Community (TEC), which established the method of coordinating employment policies by stipulating that, each year, the Council, acting on a proposal from the Commission and after consulting the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the Employment Committee, should draw up guidelines which the Member States should take into account in their employment policies, on the basis of a joint annual report by the Council and the Commission.

The Lisbon European Council defined the open method of coordination as a 'means of spreading best practice and achieving greater convergence towards the main EU goals'. It involved 'fixing guidelines for the Union combined with specific timetables for achieving the goals which they set in the short, medium and long terms; establishing, where appropriate, quantitative and qualitative indicators and benchmarks against the best in the world and tailored to the needs of different Member States and sectors as a means of comparing best practice; translating these European guidelines into national and regional policies by setting specific targets and adopting measures, taking into account national and regional differences; periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review'.

The 'Luxembourg process' procedures form the linchpin of this new strategy. The new elements introduced by Lisbon were simply giving a name to the method set out in Title V of the TEC, which deals with employment, and declaring the aim of gradually extending the application of the method (suitably adjusted to take account of sector-specific factors) to other areas such as the information society, research policy, enterprise policy, education, social inclusion, immigration, etc.

At present the Council and Commission envisage extending the method to a range of areas including: the information society, research policy, enterprise policy, education and vocational training, action to combat social exclusion, social protection, immigration policy, a common asylum policy, the development of health services, a policy to meet the needs of the elderly, etc.

Unresolved issues

The introduction and application of the open method of coordination raises a number of unresolved issues. They can be summarised as follows:

1. the role of the open method of coordination;
2. the role of the various players involved;
3. the effectiveness of the application of the method.

(1) Role of the open method of coordination

According to the Commission White Paper on European governance, the open method of coordination (OMC) does not represent an alternative to the traditional legislative approach, but complements it. Its use is appropriate in the field of employment, as employment markets have strongly marked national characteristics and the instruments whereby national policies are implemented are so diverse, or so complex, that the effort required to achieve harmonisation would be out of all proportion to the objectives to be attained. The open method of coordination is also appropriate in cases in which Member States prefer not to opt immediately for Community legislation in a given area, while having the political will to make tangible progress towards clearly identified shared objectives.

This position has not gone unchallenged. In particular, it has been pointed out that the open method of coordination is sometimes applied indiscriminately, in connection with a single action, to areas in which the Community has no competence and others in which it does have competence. This leads to confusion in the exercise of such competences and, at the same time, to the exclusion of Parliament even in situations where Community matters are concerned and there is a Treaty requirement for Parliament to be involved. This leads to an unclear system and creates unrealistic expectations on the part of citizens who are led to believe that the Community is competent to act when the open method of coordination is applied, even though that method merely involves non-binding coordination and is ultimately dependent on the goodwill of the Member States.

The difficulty of identifying the players involved in the method has also attracted criticism. In practice, the procedure is in the hands of high-level committees which are devoid of any democratic legitimacy but draw up almost all the content subsequently adopted as guidelines by the European Council. In other words, the OMC introduces an arcane technocratic process into the Community system at a time when the latter has severe problems with its public image.

Finally, the Commission is developing a tendency to propose the method in a very large number of areas, thus running the risk of transforming the open method of coordination into a covert regulatory system that is not subject to parliamentary control.

(2) Role of the players involved in the open method of coordination

The European Council has become a focus of political decision-making with regard to the drawing-up of broad strategic guidelines and monitoring their implementation. This development is explicitly acknowledged in those areas covered by the open method of coordination. Looking beyond the workings of the method itself, the spring European Council has the annual task of monitoring the state of play of the Union's economic and social modernisation strategy and updating its content.

The Council of Ministers, meanwhile, is required to play a 'governmental' role in relation to the various OMCs. The areas in which the Council intervenes have multiplied as a result of the Council's progressive assumption, in tandem with its traditional legislative role, of a governmental role in areas covered by the coordination process. This is reflected in the proliferation of preparatory groups and forums, such as the Employment Committee set up

under Article 130 ECT, the Economic and Financial Committee set up under Article 114 ECT, the Economic Policy Committee set under Article 272 ECT and the Social Protection Committee set up by the Council Decision of 19 June 2000.

The Commission, generally with the assistance of such committees, plays a crucial role as driving force and catalyst in the open method of coordination, by submitting broad guidelines and sectoral guidelines, organising the exchange of best practice, proposing indicators and managing arrangements for monitoring and peer review.

The European Parliament, on the other hand, as its resolutions have stressed on more than one occasion, is involved only to a limited extent, and on an irregular basis, in the new systems for the coordination of national policies. It is only with regard to the employment strategy that the Treaty requires the Council to formally consult the European Parliament on the proposed guidelines submitted annually by the Commission, which may result in the Commission amending its proposed employment policy guidelines.

In practice, however, in view of the time constraints inherent in a European strategy based on annual cycles, the consultation process is very rushed. The time limits imposed are too short to allow the traditional process whereby Parliament formulates an opinion to take its course.

Finally, the policy coordination process calls for greater involvement of the national parliaments as the bodies responsible for scrutinising, and conferring democratic legitimacy on, the national policies adopted in the context of the OMCs.

In keeping with the spirit of the Lisbon Council, the open method of coordination ought to make it possible to take full account of national and regional differences, with due regard to the need to find a flexible way of coordinating the activities conducted at different levels and their mutual interaction.

In practice, however, the method is based on ascertaining the Member States' national position: the role of the local bodies involved is not established in advance, as organisational arrangements are left to the national authorities. This can cause difficulties in connection with involvement of territorial authorities in the coordination process, particularly in highly decentralised countries.

Nevertheless, some guidance on such issues is contained in the Commission's communication on the assessment of the employment strategy which, *inter alia*, stresses the need for wider responsibilities to be conferred on the social partners and for their contribution to the implementation of the guidelines to be recognised. The Commission has also encouraged the European organisations representing the social partners to establish contacts with their national counterparts. Moreover, several Member States have taken the view that more effective involvement of organisations representing civil society is essential and should be encouraged.

Another aspect stressed by the Commission is that of 'vertical' cooperation between national and regional authorities and 'horizontal' cooperation between representatives of the various territorial units at their respective level.

The Commission also considers that it is necessary to facilitate cooperation between the various national and Community administrative departments to reflect the need for the employment strategy to mesh with the other areas of concerted Community action, such as social integration, education and training and pensions. It is particularly useful to ensure such cooperation between the departments dealing with employment matters and those dealing with financial affairs, education and training, equal opportunity, social security, justice and home affairs and the information society.

Finally, the Commission stresses the need for more effective coordination between employment policy, social policy and economic policy and, more generally, between the various areas in which the open method of coordination is applied.

Central role of the European Parliament

The way in which the European Union conducts its policies is changing drastically. The traditional legislative approach is not always capable of addressing existing and future economic and social problems. We are currently evolving towards new forms of policy-making. Legislative activities as such are decreasing, for example in the social sector. The constant adjustment of the open method of coordination should be seen as resulting from that trend.

The new methods are being concocted at the highest levels. Experts working for the Commission seek to establish contact with specialists in various Member States. As things stand, the open method of coordination is, in many cases, a process conducted between and on behalf of elites, the outcome of intergovernmental negotiation and consultation.

The European Parliament and the European Court of Justice are the traditional guardians of democratic debate in Europe. Parliament is either excluded as a formal or informal partner from all the various manifestations of the open coordination method, or marginalised as in the case of the employment strategy.

Parliament must force its way into these closed processes in order to exercise the requisite democratic control. Parliament must open these procedures up and form a bridge between the specialists and the parties concerned. It is only in this way that the open coordination method can retain its legitimacy and its effectiveness as a means of achieving important objectives by a 'soft' (as opposed to a 'hard law') approach.

In concrete terms, the European Parliament can:

1. organise direct debates with the relevant committees of the national parliaments;
2. issue regular invitations to the ministers responsible and the chairmen of the bodies concerned, such as the Employment Committee and the Social Protection Committee, to analyse the performance of the Member States in depth;
3. organise, at European level, consultation of the social partners concerning ways of tailoring the open method of coordination to specific sectors.

Parliament must look into its own working methods and, if necessary, adjust its procedures to take account of its role in the open coordination method. The Commission and the Council should be required to pay greater attention to the European Parliament's comments.

(3) The effectiveness of the method in practice

One question which is still completely open is that of the practical effectiveness of the process of national policy coordination via the open method of coordination. Unfortunately, a detailed assessment of the effects of the method on the process of coordinating the various national policies exists only to a limited extent.

From the point of view of the employment strategy, the only one which has been in existence for some considerable time already, the following conclusions may be drawn in connection with the assessment of the open method of coordination:

- The documents on which this evaluation is based include the national action plans and Commission documents. With regard to the national action plans, it emerges from various studies which have already been made that some of them are simply extracts from national policies cobbled together to be presented in a European context. Existing policies are simply dressed up to meet the expectations of the Commission. Sometimes deals are made with the Commission to minimise any criticism that may touch on sensitive issues. Consequently, the reports are not entirely objective. The most skilful negotiators from the Member States are able to tone down the relevant reports by such means.
- Secondly, there is the question of the involvement of national, regional and local partners. Once again, existing studies suggest that participation in the process is wholly confined to a small elite. No efforts are made to mobilise all stakeholders at national level, thus reducing the momentum and impact of the process.
- Thirdly, we should consider by what means this top-down process could be accompanied by a bottom-up process extending further than the small elite in question.

Does this mean that only negative conclusions may be drawn? No. Clearly, they have also been positive developments, but these are all too few given the extent of the process.

- On the positive side, the key elements of employment policy have undoubtedly been gradually Europeanised. The Member States have learned to look through the same 'European' spectacles, which have enabled them to compare the failings of their own policies with the successes of the most effective policies.
- This same European perspective places existing national initiatives in a European context, which may just nudge them in the right direction.

Conclusions

The foregoing comments lead to the following initial conclusion: although the open method of coordination is undoubtedly a useful instrument, nevertheless its scope should be defined and the relevant procedure established by enshrining it in the Treaty. Care should be taken, therefore, to spell out the principle that the method may not be used as a substitute for more binding forms of Community regulation in order to evade them, without necessarily excluding the possibility of the open method of coordination being used to accompany legislative

measures with a view to extending their range.

Furthermore, the role of the European Parliament must be clarified and enhanced, as should the role of the national parliaments, the social partners and civil society, and local and regional bodies.

Finally, an assessment of the operation and results of applying the open method of coordination in various fields is evidently called for in order to ascertain how effective it really is as a means of achieving coordination.

19 March 2003

OPINION OF THE COMMITTEE ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

for the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs

on the analysis of the Open Coordination Method in the fields of employment and social affairs
(2002/2223(INI))

Draftsperson: Marie-Hélène Gillig

PROCEDURE

The Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities appointed Marie-Hélène Gillig draftsperson at its meeting of 26 November 2002.

It considered the draft opinion at its meetings of 19 February 2003 and 18 March 2003.

At the latter meeting it adopted the following conclusions by 23 votes to 1, with 0 abstentions.

The following were present for the vote: Anna Karamanou (chairperson), Marianne Eriksson (vice-chairperson), Jillian Evans (vice-chairperson), Olga Zrihen Zaari (vice-chairperson) Marie-Hélène Gillig (draftsperson), María Antonia Avilés Perea, Regina Bastos, Ilda Figueiredo (for Armonia Bordes), Fiorella Ghilardotti, Koldo Gorostiaga Atxalandabaso, Karin Jöns (for Lissy Gröner), Hans Karlsson, Hedwig Keppelhoff-Wiechert (for Emilia Franziska Müller pursuant to Rule 153(2)), Christa Klauf, Rodi Kratsa-Tsagaropoulou, Astrid Lulling, Maria Martens, Christa Prets, Olle Schmidt (for Lone Dybkjær), Miet Smet, Patsy Sørensen, Joke Swiebel and Sabine Zissener.

CONCLUSIONS

The Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities calls on the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, as the committee responsible, to incorporate the following points in its motion for a resolution:

1. Notes that, given that the Open Coordination Method (OCM) is intended to be applied to a series of areas having direct implications for women, including the European strategy on employment and the policy for combating social exclusion, it is necessary to include the dimension of equal opportunities for men and women and gender mainstreaming at all levels of formalisation of this new policy management instrument;
2. Recognises that the Open Coordination Method is a procedure that is likely to bring about notable progress, but stresses its slowness and its tendency to mask the lack of goodwill on the part of any given Member State towards the objective being pursued. As regards equality of opportunity, which is recognised as an objective of the European Union, takes the view that decisive measures for women belong more to the legislative procedure, and therefore calls on the Commission not to limit itself to the OCM in this area;
3. Notes the persistence of distinctions between the sexes and discrimination against women, notably in the area of employment (lower pay for equivalent work) and in the over-representation of women in the most disadvantaged sections of the population. Calls on the Commission and the Council to bear these considerations in mind in the context of the policies covered by the OCM, by reinforced drafting of common objectives, clear guidelines, deadlines and relevant evaluation criteria and by promoting the gathering of data by gender, and of both qualitative and quantitative indicators, with a view to encouraging best practice;
4. Notes that the Open Coordination Method tends to favour the proliferation of the preparatory formations and forums known collectively as 'committees'. Takes the view, in this connection, that the formal establishment of a high-level working party responsible for equal opportunities issues, made up of representatives/experts of the Member States, the social partners and NGOs, could help to bring a good level of expertise to the framing, implementation and follow-up of equal opportunities policy. Takes the view that the Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities should be fully involved and consulted, in order to guarantee the democratic legitimacy of the Open Coordination Method;
5. Considers, on behalf of European citizens, that the visibility and transparency of Community action to promote equal opportunities and, more generally, of the effort to combat discrimination against women should be enhanced. Calls on the Commission to ensure that the OCM does not widen the gap between the day-to-day reality of women's lives and the action of the European Union. Calls on the Commission to provide the necessary mechanisms for the OCM to involve, at every stage of its implementation, representatives of civil society, the social partners and the NGOs involved in promoting

equal opportunities at both regional and local level. Only involvement of all the relevant levels of action will serve to reinforce membership and develop a sense of belonging to the European Union.