

Brussels, 17 July 1974

Summary of speech by Vice-President Hillery at the
Social Welfare World Conference, Nairobi
14-20 July 1974

On behalf of the Commission for the European Communities may I say how pleased and honoured I am to have this opportunity to address an important World Conference such as this. I am conscious of the fact that the European Community which I serve unites only 9 of the many nations represented here to-day, although many more of you have established special links with our Community or are in the process of doing so. I am even more conscious that the European Community is often seen in the world at large primarily as an economic union, with little relevance to the field of social welfare.

Although the European Community is not a comprehensive world-wide organisation like the United Nations or even the International Council on Social Welfare I feel that the example of the Community should be of interest to all of you as it can claim to be a unique form of international collaboration. The Community is truly international because it brings together nine separate nations as well as numerous associate members: its unique quality lies in the financial and legal instruments that it possesses, which go beyond those usually possessed by international organisations. There has been two long-standing elements in the history of social policy in the Community: provisions for migrant workers and the European Social Fund.

Probably the greatest achievement as regards migrant workers has been the co-ordination of the diverse social security systems of the member states to ensure that migrant workers have equal treatment with the nationals in the social security schemes of their host country and that contributions made to schemes in other member states count towards benefits in the host country.

The European Social Fund on the other hand is a powerful financial instrument. Originally conceived to repay government retraining costs for persons displaced by structural changes in industry, the ambit has been widened in the last two years through the creation of a New Social Fund to allow the Community scope for more positive interventions in employment policy.

New importance of Social Policy

Those are long standing activities, even though in the case of the Social Fund they are now pursued on a broader scale. However there has been increasing awareness over many years that social policy must be more than a corrective to the social impact of economic policies; that social policy is legitimate and essential in its own right. This view found expression in the final declaration issued by the political heads of the member States at the conference in Paris in October 1972.

Social Action Programme

The Summit Conference charged the institutions of the Community with the preparation of a Social Action Programme for the years 1974-6, which was finally approved by the Council of Ministers in January of this year. The actions listed in this programme fall under three heads: full and better employment; improvement of living and working conditions; and greater participation of workers and employers in the economic and social decisions of the Community.

The Council listed nine of the many actions included in the programme as priorities, namely:

1. Consultation between the member States on employment policies
2. An action programme for migrant workers
3. A common Vocational Training policy and the setting up of a European Vocational Training Centre
4. Action to achieve equality between men and women as regards access to employment, vocational training, advancement, and working conditions, including pay
5. Consultation between member States on social protection policies
6. An initial action programme on health and safety at work
7. Specific measures to combat poverty through pilot schemes
8. The progressive involvement of workers in the life of undertakings
9. The involvement of the social partners (management and labour) in the decisions of the Community.

Other actions of special interest

Among the other actions which will be of particular interest to this audience are the extension of social security coverage to persons hitherto not covered and the improvement of mechanisms for the adaptation of social security benefits to rising costs and standards of living.

Our approach to these last two measures has been to prepare preliminary studies and then use these as a basis for discussion with groups of experts. The end result we hope will be an agreement between the governments on essential action and the issue of Recommendations.

The pilot projects against poverty represent a different approach. A small group of experts chosen by the Commission has been at work drawing up the framework for a programme, the draft of which was examined by a group of 60 experts at a seminar in Brussels last month. These experts included government representatives, university workers and social workers and others active in the field from all types of organisations including pressure groups and self-help associations. In due course this programme will be examined by the various institutions of the Community and it is our aim that the Community will support a number of ventures in the coming year. This will be action-research at the grass-roots sponsored by the Community both intellectually and financially, to help guide the direction of future developments in social welfare.