

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AREA
STANDING COMMITTEE
OF THE EFTA STATES

4/SP/W/006
10 December 1996
Brussels

WORKING GROUP ON SOCIAL POLICY

**Comments by the EFTA Working Group on the Commission Green Paper: Living
and Working in the Information Society**

I INTRODUCTION

1. The Commission adopted a Green Paper on Living and Working in the Information Society on 25 July 1996. The Green Paper which invites comments and debate particularly on the implications of the Information Society on work organisation, employment and social cohesion was launched at a Colloquium undertaken by the Irish Presidency on 30 September to 1 October 1996 in Dublin.

2. In view of providing written comments to the Paper, the EFTA EEA States are pleased to have been invited to attend the Colloquium in Dublin. The meeting focused on four main themes depicted in the Paper; firstly mapping out some trends with regard to employment and economic structure in the Information Society, secondly looked at the question of the future of work both in terms of organisation and new patterns of work, thirdly it was concerned with the labour market and learning in the Information Society and lastly living in the Information Society. The Colloquium provided the EFTA States with the opportunity to take part in the launch of discussions which is now feeding into a wide debate.

3. Given that a range of issues touched upon in the Commission's Green Paper fall within the scope of the EEA Agreement and in particular in the spirit of the information and consultation procedures provided for in the Agreement, the EFTA EEA States are pleased to submit comments on the Paper. Legislation in the area of labour law, health and safety at work and equal opportunities between men and women are covered under horizontal provisions relevant to the four freedoms (Part V, Annex XVIII of the EEA Agreement). Moreover, EFTA-EU co-operation outside the four freedoms in the area of social policy is covered in Part VI, Articles 78 to 80 of the EEA Agreement and is also referred to in Article 5, paragraph 1 of Protocol 31 to the Agreement.

4. In the area of employment, the EFTA EEA States are very pleased to participate in the meetings of the Group of Directors General for Employment and the MISEP

(Mutual Information Systems on Employment) correspondents and look forward to a continuing co-operation and mutual exchange of experiences in this field.

5. As regards equal opportunities, the EFTA States currently participate as observers in the Fourth Community Action Programme for Equal Opportunities and to that end in the Management Committee of the programme and in the Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities.

II GENERAL REMARKS

6. The EFTA Working Group on Social Policy draws a very positive conclusion of EFTA EU co-operation in the area of employment and social policy and welcomes the Green Paper on Living and Working in the Information Society which highlights challenges which will have to be faced with new emerging technologies.

7. The situation in the EFTA EEA States in terms of development and adaptation to the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) is similar to the one being experienced by most EU Member States. On those grounds, the EFTA EEA States are pleased to note that the Commission has pointed out a number of very important issues such as work organisation and employment which will have to be tackled at local, regional, Member States' and Community level in order to adjust to the effects created by new ICTs.

8. Given the extensive and general scope of the Green Paper, the EFTA EEA States have limited their comments to the following three topics: work organisation, employment and equal opportunities.

III WORK ORGANISATION

9. Information and communication technologies are having a tremendous impact on working life and organisation of companies in the European Economic Area as a whole. The Green Paper raises three challenges in this context. Firstly, it points out the need to build knowledge and raise awareness of the potential of the new paradigm of work organisation to deliver both productivity growth and job satisfaction, secondly to help SMEs maximise the potential of this change to become more competitive and thirdly to modernise the contractual framework for working life to find ways and means to reconcile flexibility and security.

10. Given the increasing globalisation of the economy combined with the decentralising potential of the Information Society, the EFTA EEA States are in agreement with the Commission that the need for developing work organisation is essential. To this end, the EFTA EEA States would like to underline that **globalisation** and **competition** from low-wage countries must be considered an important factor when the Commission reflects upon a policy to meet the challenges of work organisation in the Information Society.

11. The Green Paper states that a new concept of security should focus on balance between flexibility and security and the mutual benefits for enterprises and workers of a balance between the two elements. When finding a new balance between **flexibility and security**, the EFTA EEA States consider that any approaches to meet these new challenges should not be at the expense of the high standards which are already existing in the work organisation of the EFTA EEA States.

12. As concerns **flexible work**, the EFTA EEA States envisage situations may be created wherein workers will, more or less, be permanently situated outside the employers premises and on those grounds consider that measures which prevent social exclusion must be kept in the forefront. The EFTA EEA States are also concerned that the employers responsibility for health and safety of workers will be marginalised as employees increasingly perform their jobs outside the employers premises and moreover predict that less contacts between management and colleagues will set in a challenge for companies to maintain a company culture.

13 The Green Paper holds a rather optimistic view on the increased possibilities which ICTs will offer in terms of increased productivity and less costs for enterprises, and also the flexibility made possible for the individual employee. Given that some EFTA EEA States are governed by labour law based on traditional work organisation, the EFTA EEA side considers that any **flexible arrangements** resulting from ICTs will have to be studied carefully.

14. The issue of **job security** is a matter of vital importance in the labour market policies of the EFTA EEA States, in particular, as concerns the health and safety of persons at work and the protection of workers against unfair dismissals. The EFTA EEA States envisage that new ICTs will create situations whereby a large number of unqualified workers will be excluded from the market. Moreover, the EFTA fear that a growing number of the workforce will become contractors which consequently could create unstable and insecure work places which will not necessarily benefit the employer nor the worker in the long term.

15. In order to meet the above mentioned challenge of achieving a balance between flexibility and security, the EFTA EEA States strongly support the view of the Commission that **education and training and retraining** is a fundamental element to tackle the challenges created by the new technology. The approaches being utilised in the EFTA EEA States are depicted under Part IV Unemployment.

16. The Green Paper addresses the questions of **modernising the institutions** and the institutional framework of working life. This includes providing the right legal and contractual framework to allow firms and individuals more flexibility, while providing adequate security to workers. In some of the EFTA EEA States, the co-operation between **social partners** has a long tradition and is a vital part of working life. In these same states, labour law, company law and collective agreements comprise procedures for co-determination, information and consultation as regards health and safety questions as well as the right of workers' representatives to take seat in the boards of companies. As ICTs will create new and more decentralised forms of organisation and

consequently bring about a situation whereby employees are not necessarily situated at the workplace, some EFTA EEA States consider an essential element for an active and well functioning working life in the future to maintain and develop the role of the social partners. The latter are, already, in some EFTA EEA States taking on responsibilities in labour market programmes, in particular, with regard to the integration of youth into employment.

IV EMPLOYMENT

17. Some EFTA EEA States are to an extent confronted with the same challenges as the EU States when it comes to the effects that ICTs will have on employment.

18. The EFTA EEA States are pleased that the Green Paper recognises that there is positive link between technological progress, productivity and economic growth which offers the potential for the creation of new forms of employment.

19. In Norway, an increasing proportion of employment is found in jobs and industries which handle ICTs in some form or another and some are even extensive users of ICTs. In 1995, it was estimated that eighty per cent of white collar workers in Norway were utilising ICTs at work, a percentage which is slightly less than in the US, but higher than Great Britain and Germany.

20. Information and communication technologies provide the possibility of delivering information and training at home, work or at a training centre in some of the EFTA EEA States. In sparsely populated countries like Norway and Iceland, it provides **a new tool for learning, life long learning and labour market information**. The Public Employment Agency in Norway is now using the Internet to inform about job vacancies, available places in upper secondary schools and training programmes and also for statistical purposes

21. The EFTA EEA States are pleased with the major emphasis which the Green Paper places on the necessity of **education, training and retraining** of the labour force which is continuously forced to adjust to new information and communication technologies. In the view of the EFTA States, education and training are the main elements which will have to be developed in the future to meet the changing circumstances.

22. Information and communication technologies are continuously being introduced in **manufacturing industries** to improve products and make processes more efficient. According to the EFTA EEA States, both employees and companies will have to prepare themselves for the challenges created with new ICTs when jobs disappear and new ones are created. The mismatch in the labour force which arises in the wake of the transition from old to new technologies may have serious impacts for those who lose their jobs. Organising **life-long learning** so that people are provided with the opportunity to undertake new employment is a shared responsibility between employers and authorities.

23. Competence and abilities to adjust all levels of the labour force, strengthens the possibilities of enterprises to adapt to changes and moreover, improve the position of the individual in the labour market. To this end, some EFTA EEA States have opted for **strengthening of education** through an efficient training and education system for youth oriented towards vocational studies, and by increasing the level of competence of the unemployed, particularly those with little education.

24. The Commission points out in its Paper, the critical question of **integrating the unemployed into working life**. In some of the EFTA EEA States, the active market labour policies pursued are mainly concerned with supplying the unemployed with new skills. In Norway, ICT training has been the focus of training courses for the unemployed. The courses have been targeted groups such as unemployed administrative workers, mechanics, engineers and architects. In some EFTA EEA States reforms in the educational system have been undertaken in order to accommodate the needs which pupils/students and participants in the labour market courses have, when it comes to linking sections of their education so that they can obtain formal recognition of their training.

25. Given the experience of the EFTA EEA States, it is of prime importance to **maintain people in the labour force**. To this end, teaching the unemployed who have little education and low knowledge of skills is one of the major challenges in the active labour market policies of the EFTA EEA countries. Moreover, Norway believes it is also significant to have labour law provisions to reduce the number of dismissals.

V EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

26. Equality of opportunity between men and women, an issue of high importance for some EFTA EEA States, is touched upon in the Green Paper. Despite the enormous need for tackling inequality between men and women in an emerging Information Society, in particular, with regard to working conditions, the EFTA EEA States regret the limited attention the subject has received in the Paper.

27. Given the enormous impact created by information and communication technologies, the EFTA EEA States consider it of major importance that the use of **computer technology is integrated in education and training** and that women and men from an early age are provided with the opportunity to learn to use computer technology.

28. As concerns **gender bias** or potential gender bias, the EFTA EEA States support the Commission's view that it can be overcome in the education and training process by a variety of measures such as making course material more 'gender aware' and ensuring that education and training takes place in environments which are more sympathetic to and comfortable for women.

29. The EFTA EEA side supports the view of the Commission that much progress can be made by involving women in the **design and specification of ICT products**. In effect, ICT systems and programmes present guides and frameworks for subsequent work operations and decisions. To that end, some EFTA EEA States consider it unfortunate that women are underrepresented in the ICT industry itself, in particular, in the designing and constructing of computer systems and programmes and, moreover, in the consulting and sales of the aforementioned products.

30. The EFTA EEA States strongly support the suggestion made by the Commission that public policies in the area of equal opportunities should ensure that the objectives of equal opportunity policies are enhanced at work and in the home by paying particular attention to the **education of young people** in ICTs and by **incorporating ICT information and training in the various policies** and actions designed to correct imbalances in the gender roles of adults. However, Norway would like to emphasise that policies of “ensuring “ the enhancement of equal opportunity in this area and statements to that effect should specifically take into account the different starting points between men and women when it comes to ICTs and therefore women from early age must receive particular attention when it comes to education and training in the area.

31. As the Commission, EFTA EEA States firmly uphold the view that ICTs will have the potential to improve the quality of life for the **elderly** as well as the **disabled** by facilitating independent living in the community and helping to open up new possibilities for access, participation and socio-economic integration.

VI CONCLUSION

32. In conclusion, the EEA EFTA States would like to emphasise that whether in the context of work organisation, employment or equal opportunities, the new challenges of information and communication technologies must in the first instance be met by adapting education, training and retraining systems. These elements are clearly underlined as the key factors in the Icelandic and Norwegian Policy Documents on information and communication technologies which have been produced this year. The EFTA EEA States look forward to the continuing debate on the Commission Green Paper and will, in particular, follow with interest the developments towards an Action Plan envisaged to follow in the forthcoming year.

* * * * *