



SECTORAL SOCIAL DIALOGUE COMMITTEE FOR FURNITURE

19 May 2020

Plenary meeting (videoconference)

MINUTES

Chair : Mr JOHANSSON

1. Welcome-opening of the meeting

2. Adoption of the agenda

The agenda of the meeting was adopted. Points 4 (European Green Deal) and 5 (New Circular Economy Action Plan) will be discussed jointly.

3. Adoption of the draft minutes of the joint working group meeting dd. 20 February 2020.

The Commission explained that the minutes were not yet available, due to COVID-19 related administrative delays. The adoption of the minutes was postponed until the next meeting.

4. European Green Deal

See point 5.

5. New Circular Economy Action Plan (CEAP)

By way of introduction, Mr GEHRING pointed at the EU's role as an active policy-maker in industry policy. Recently, the focus has shifted to greening and digitalisation of the economy. The Commission communication 2019(640) rightly focuses on skills, bio-economy and the internal market, according to EFBWW. For social dialogue, this means that social partners should raise their voices jointly (preferably by means of a joint opinion), and combine their reactions on Commission proposals in various policy areas, such as the Green Deal and CEAP.

For EFIC, Ms KEMENDI reacted by saying that a joint opinion should also include industrial policy. She also referred to EFIC's policy paper on the circular economy, released in April latest. She then proposed to work on a draft joint statement at secretariat level. Mr HOOGENDIJK added that a joint statement should combine but also differentiate between the workers' and the employers' respective angles. He also considers the Green Deal and CEAP as the right instruments to address the loss of turnover faced by companies, which are in "survival mode".

6. Industry Policy

Due to unforeseen circumstances, DG GROW could not be present at the meeting. However, a number of replies to social partners' questions were provided by e-mail, as copied hereunder.

- *What is the status of a new blueprint for the forest based industries?*

ANSWER: *It is not foreseen at this stage to have a stand-alone F-BI Blueprint as was produced in 2013. However, on the Industrial Policy side, a number of the F-BI are included in other, more horizontal initiatives, such as that for the Energy-intensive Industries, launched in November. Just as the last Blueprint was an integral part of the EU Forest Strategy in 2013, there will also most likely be recognisable parts of the next Forest Strategy – due before the end of this year – that will relate specifically to the forest-based industries. In both contexts, the recent F-BI Vision 2050 will be fully taken into account, together with any other relevant inputs from the sector.*

- *What is the impact of the European Green Deal on our industries and the (positive) role our industries could play. We have the impression that the specific role and possible positive function of the FB-I are underestimated and not sufficiently appreciated. If wood becomes the raw material for more and more areas/applications, do we have the basis to supply enough raw material also in the future?*

ANSWER: *In the context of the Green Deal as more generally, EU policies are increasingly horizontal (non-sectoral), and in Industry Policy with some focus on value chains and networks rather than the traditional linear sectors. There are opportunities for the F-BI under the GD but these are not necessarily identifiable as “F-BI” ones per se but more thematic where all or , more likely, parts of the F-BI can benefit.*

If the SD feels that the F-BI are underestimated, as has been advised already, this should be brought to the attention of the Commission at the highest level.

In the meantime and in any case, it should be recalled that EU policies have to remain material-neutral and so any given material cannot be favoured. Accordingly, wood cannot be directly promoted but its use can be encouraged by its meeting relevant performance criteria, such as being legal, sustainable, low-energy, etc.

- *Are there any specific action in connection with the current pandemic dedicated to our sectors?*

ANSWER: *in keeping with the answer to the last question, there are not specific F-BI actions as such. However, there are likely to be targeted opportunities for specific parts of the F-BI, particularly at national level. Meanwhile, in response to individual enquiries from industry, DG GROW has already informed those responsible at EU level for helping manage the Covid-19 crisis of particular issues, e.g. the need not to have national restrictions on wooden pallets, essential for transporting most goods.*

Particular opportunities have already been developed by the paper and non-woven sectors in shifting to the production of PPE (personnel protective equipment). (Sadly, there has been a rise in demand for wooden – and other – coffins!)

It would be helpful if together the social partners could please inform DG GROW f their ideas for helping to stimulate demand for wood as Covid-19 restrictions are hopefully lifted. Examples might be the wider use of wooden construction products for expanding hospital capacity and also that of schools where pupils have to respect social distancing.

- *What are the perspectives of the Commissions Expert Group for the F-BI? Is it mainly a for a for information exchange or is it also planned to work on and develop policy actions?*

ANSWER: The future of the F-BI EG is very much in the hands of its members. Expert Groups are targeted and normally meant to be only temporary for a (set of) specified task(s). Their prime function is to advise the Commission for policy-making. The F-BI EG is unusual in being based on a Commission Decision. But that does not set it in stone or concrete! That Decision can be revoked. In any case, the membership is very overdue for revision and we will be considering this during 2020.

In the meantime and in any case, members should make the most use of it by being pro-active in all senses.

- *On the roadmap for the new forest strategy. Are there any new initiative to increase our capacity to fight forest fires?*

ANSWER: DG ENV has directed us towards The European Green Deal, which states that:

“The new EU forest strategy will have as its key objectives effective afforestation, and forest preservation and restoration in Europe, to help to increase the absorption of CO₂, reduce the incidence and extent of forest fires, and promote the bio-economy”

DG GROW also added that there had been an upgrade of the civil protection mechanism under rescEU:

In March 2019, the EU Civil Protection Mechanism was upgraded to establish a new European reserve of capacities (the 'rescEU reserve') which includes firefighting planes and helicopters. For the 2020 forest fire season, the European Commission co-financed the stand-by availability of additional aerial forest fire-fighting capacities to address potential shortcomings in responding to fires. Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Spain and Sweden put together 11 firefighting planes and six helicopters at the disposal of other EU Member States in case of an emergency. The new system also sees greater investment in knowledge sharing and preparedness activities.

https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what-we-do/civil-protection/forest-fires_en

Also, DG AGRI informed DG GROW that “the EU Forest Strategy will be adopted in Q1 of 2021, having been postponed. There is no other information so far.”

In a first reaction, Mr HOOGENDIJK acknowledged the difficulties in promoting wood, but he pointed at the potential of the furniture sector, which also uses other materials. He therefore stressed the need to focus on digital and innovative techniques, and on recyclable, more climate-neutral material.

Ms GANDOLFI (EFBWW) stressed the need for a strategy that would present the sector as positive and useful. The social partners should become leaders in this process. She also made an appeal for a pro-active approach in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to obtain required funds for the sector.

Ms KEMENDI stated that EFIC is one of the signatories of the F-BI 2020 vision paper. However, it appears that the Commission is focussing more on industrial eco-systems at present.

Referring to the possible approach of a joint statement, Mr GEHRING pointed at the heterogeneous nature of SMEs; he acknowledged that the needs of the economy at large are easier to address, but a sectoral differentiation needs to be made in a

logical way. Also, a joint paper from social partners that refers to Commission initiatives should be based on self-commitment.

7. Joint statement on digitalisation

Mr GEHRING presented the draft joint statement. He informed the meeting that he received congratulations on the text, but also a number of comments. The employers' organisations agreed with the proposed modifications, and proposed to develop a final version at secretariat level, for signature at a later stage.

8. COVID-19 Pandemic in Europe

- a) Ms GENORIO of the Commission's Secretariat-General gave an overview of the policy responses of the EU. In her presentation (attached) she provided detailed information on the financial resources made available to address the major economic shock caused by COVID-19. Also, she informed the participants that the next Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF) would be adapted to the post-corona situation. She also stressed the importance of the European semester in the endeavour to come to a common crisis response.
- b) The social partners then discussed the draft joint statement on COVID-19, jointly developed by EFBWW, EFIC, UEA, CEI-Bois, EPF and EOS. Mr GEHRING invited the national social partners to engage in the dissemination of that statement.

9. Projects

- a) Mr RODRIGO (CENFIM) presented the SAWYER project (presentation attached). The project is in the final stage. Mr JOHANSSON pointed at the ambitious objectives of the project, and the interesting results expected. Ms KEMENDI informed the participants that EFIC created a section on its website containing best practices on circular economy.
- b) Ms SIKOROWSKA (EFBWW) gave the state of play of the Bolster Up II project, the follow-up project that focuses on recognition of qualifications of three professions. The project expert is Woodwize. She also announced that the final conference would be postponed, due to the coronavirus crisis. Updated information can be found on the project website : <https://bolster-up2.eu/project/>
- c) On Wood Dust measurement, Mr GEHRING informed the participants that the German project owner "Berufsgenossenschaft Holz" (represented by Mr GENTNER) is still looking for participants at national level. He also proposed to become involved as European social partners. More in particular, a political agreement on the calibration of the measurement is needed, for which social partners are important stakeholders. He stressed that EU-level harmonisation is not the objective, since it would have a financial a remarkable financial impact (new measurement devices and devaluation of existing data) for prevention institutions and companies in some countries. Rather a comparison of measurement devices is the aim. The results will be discussed in the social dialogue meetings.

10. AOB

- a) On the CCMI opinion for the Furniture Industry and the creation of a study group, the dossier has not evolved, since the European Economic and Social

Committee is closed due to the COVID-19 crisis. Mr GEHRING already invited the social partners to think about possible names of experts in the area.

- b) Ms KEMENDI informed the participants that the Alliance for Flame Retardants Free Furniture – of which EFIC is a member – issued a position paper in April, as a reaction to the Circular Economy Action Plan. The paper contains a section on circular economy, but also on health and increased fire toxicity. As a reaction, the International Bromine Council issued a public position paper claiming that the Alliance issued unfounded allegations. . The Alliance will not respond publicly to the BSEF paper.
- c) EFBWW enquired whether the employers’ organisations would be interested in producing a joint position expressing concerns and views on the Commission’s future OSH strategy, even before its publication. Both UEA and EFIC confirmed their interest. A draft would be prepared at secretariat level.
- d) Ms LANDOLFI (EFBWW) briefly announced the “Consultation on Gender equality and women’s rights worldwide – 2021-2025 action plan”. The economy is based on gender equality and the gender gap should be closed. It is also important to promote investments enabling women to become entrepreneurs. In addition, there is a gender aspect in the digital and green transformations. There is a risk that gender equality policies will gain less attention in the future due to the focus on COVID-19. Therefore, Ms GANDOLFI proposed to put gender equality high on the agenda of social dialogue meetings.
- e) The point on Brexit was postponed to a later meeting.

Annexes :

- List of participants
- Presentations
 - o The EU response to the coronavirus crisis
 - o Project status - SAWYER project

- Annex : List of participants

<p><u>Employers</u></p> <p>EFIC Ms Gabriella KEMENDI (EU) Ms Giorgia MURGIA (EU) Mr Paolo CHINI (IT) Ms Pauline CLOUZET (FR) Ms Anna FREIJ (SE) Mr Kees HOOGENDIJK (NL) Ms Leva ERELE (LV) Ms Christelle ROCA-PRIEZ (FR) Mr William VERNON (IE)</p> <p>UEA Mr Martin PAVLIS (EU) Mr Tomas LUKES (CZ) Mr Gualter MORGADO (RO) Ms Andreea PARASCHIV (RO) Mr Joaquim SOLANA (ES) Mr Julio RODRIGO (ES)</p> <p>15 employers' representatives (7 women, 8 men) (3 EU, 12 MS)</p>	<p><u>Workers</u></p> <p>EFBWW Mr Tom DELEU (EU) Mr Rolf GEHRING (EU) Ms Magdalena SIKOROWSKA (EU) Mr Werner BUELEN (EU) Ms Paula CRAVINA (EU) Mr Bruno BOTHUA (FR) Mr Johann BOTUHA (FR) Mr Fabio DEL CARRO (IT) Ms Brigitte DOETH (DE) Mr Mikko HAKKARAINEN (FI) Mr Kenneth JOHANSSON (SE) Ms Mercedes LANDOLFI (IT) Ms Chiara MAFFE (IT) Mr Andrea MERLI (IT) Mr Ole-Kristian PAULSEN (NO) Mr Andrew ROBINSON (UK) Mr John VILLADSEN (DK)</p> <p>17 workers' representatives (4 women, 13 men) (5 EU, 11 MS, 1 TC)</p>
<p><u>Other participants</u> Ms Hana GENORIO (SG)</p>	
<p><u>European Commission</u> Mr Danny SCHEERLINCK (EMPL.A.2)</p>	