

THE NATIONAL SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AGREEMENT

a) **The need and prospect for a National Social Development Agreement**

The ESC has issued over 200 opinions so far, i.e. texts containing stances and proposals of bills or in regard of issues ESC has chosen on its own initiative. The forenamed opinions are not only useful at the moment when they are issued, but they are also a valuable guide for those who wish to find the common denominator of the social forces' viewpoints of the country concerning the thorny national issues.

However, all these ESC interventions in the public dialogue in our country, even those concerning broader policies such as competitiveness, employment, education, health care were isolated, in the sense that they dealt with a specific more limited or global scope issue. It is, however, known that individual policies at economic, political and social level must not be designed and implemented separately but in combination fuelling each other.

Holding in mind this basic truth and based on the experience and institutional memory of its interventions in all political sectors over the past few years, the ESC has decided to make a qualitative leap in collaboration with the social agencies it is made up of, i.e. to shape a framework of stances and proposals for a National Social Development Agreement that will concern and connect all the fundamental sectors of the economic and social policy of our country.

A similar agreement is undoubtedly necessary in any country any time. However, in this specific period of deep economic and social crisis, it acquires a particular meaning in Greece as our country is at a critical crossroads, where the substantial domestic structural weaknesses and gaps, which have become all the more acute over the past few years, are affected by the consequences of a very serious international crisis which is not only of financial nature.

This combination affects the economy as a whole, our society, as well as any citizen and enterprise, thus undermining the progress made over the past few decades.

Our country is thus called upon to solve, in an effective, transparent, socially fair and long-lasting way, problems that have deteriorated over the past few years in an extremely unfavourable international environment.

The dialogue on the National Social Development Agreement was conducted in this context on ESC's responsibility and with the participation of both sides of industry, as well as with the support of renowned experts of acknowledged scientific prestige and the whole ESC scientific labour force. Dialogue was based on the long-standing points of view that ESC has expressed on important issues, including the opinions issued over the past twelve months, which were own-initiative opinions even on issues that have traditionally been the topic of discussions between both sides of industry, such as education, public administration and health care.

This dialogue resulted in the National Social Development Agreement structured in the following basic policy sectors:

1. Development - Competitiveness
2. Employment
3. Knowledge society – Life-long learning
4. Education
5. Research - Innovation

6. Fiscal policy
7. Public Administration
8. Social insurance
9. Welfare – Social security
10. Health care
11. Standard of living – Living conditions
12. Equal treatment – Migration policy
13. Climate change – Energy sector
14. Natural environment
15. Rural development – Development in the countryside

In regard of the forenamed topics, the current situation is first of all described, then the basic objectives to be attained are listed and, finally, proposals are made as to how to achieve these objectives.

This Agreement is not a draft of a governmental scheme or an effort to express and mainly to replace the ESC partners, who are fully independent.

A similar agreement is not a static text. Conditions change and the policies implemented must be re-evaluated both in terms of their implementation pace and as to whether they meet the requirements of the current conditions. Therefore, the Agreement is not simply an intervention in the current social, working and financial conditions, but it lays the foundation for a long-standing and well-structured process of social dialogue focusing on the serious problems of the country. The forenamed dialogue will result in providing solutions towards the right direction and will thus be accepted and applied. This dimension also determines the prospect which the National Social Development Agreement undoubtedly has and the ESC deems very important.

b) National Social Development Agreement and the International Financial Crisis

The current crisis has certainly raised further obstacles to the shaping but also to the implementation of this Agreement. The said obstacles can, however, be tackled in a spirit of understanding of both sides of industry.

The following observations represent a starting point for this understanding:

First of all, the problem is worldwide and thus requires worldwide solutions, such as measures to reinforce supervision and coordination by international financial organizations in accordance with the steering decisions that must be taken, at European, international but also national level, towards a different direction that will limit or even eliminate similar phenomena that lead to the re-emergence of economic crises.

Secondly, due to the international financial crisis the need to face the permanent structural problems of the Greek economy, society and public administration becomes even more imperative.

Thirdly, immediate intervention measures are needed to relieve those affected the most and prevent foreseeable malfunctions of the economy and the job market, which will, however, take into account the need for a long-standing development policy for sustainable development and social cohesion.

On the basis of the forenamed observations the ESC brings forward, in the context of the Agreement, its updated proposals once again, which it has already formulated in the past or considers urgent in the current situation, in view of the decisions taken at European level:

Taking measures for the immediate relief of the lower social economic layers, such as taxation or strengthening the available income of workers, pensioners and the unemployed.

Operation of a poverty combating fund in order to reinforce people or families that do not have sufficient resources and are objectively unable to sustain themselves through their own efforts (by finding employment) or from other sources, especially through social security benefits.

Institutional protection of labour and labour rights, reinforcement of labour quality through effective checks to make sure labour and social security law is complied with.

Development of actions to reinforce employment mainly of young people, in order to facilitate their integration into the productive process, but also that of the long-term unemployed especially by integrating them into the social sector of the economy.

Reinforcement of entrepreneurship by abolishing superfluous obstacles which are raised against the development of enterprises but do not serve any social purpose.

Emphasis on innovation, knowledge-based society, research and technology, education and on-going training, mainly in critical sectors such as tourism, green economy etc.

Implementation of another development policy model based on the protection of the environment, as well as “green development” and employment-oriented policies.

Protection of consumers, borrowers, tackling high prices of consumer goods, cartels and abuse of monopolistic positions on the market.

Strengthening small and medium-sized enterprises and the employment they create.

Change of operation of the financial system where the supervisory role of the Bank of Greece will be reinforced.

The orientation of the Greek economy and society towards the achievement of the forenamed goals as proposed by the ESC cannot but have a favourable effect. A great number of European countries have already chosen this path, including subsidizing employment, supporting research, “green” development, supporting important sectors of the economy (transports, energy supply design). It is up to our country to plan and implement a similar strategy immediately.

c) Instead of a conclusion

The common development and socially fair path is a mature demand of citizens and an imperative of our times.

This path calls for an entrepreneurial plan and visible results within a more general vision.

For any agreement to bear fruit it is necessary and imperative to reinforce institutions and transform them through reform policies.

Above all, there is a compelling need for respecting institutions and supporting them so that they may play their role beyond any kind of expediencies. Thus solid foundations will be laid for a reliable political social system and field on the basis of which a different social economic environment will be shaped.

From this perspective it is a duty of us all to implement this agreement.