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The economic crisis is a call for change

Open letter to the Presidents of the EU institutions

On 28-30 April 2009 representatives of European churches met in Brussels and Mechelen at a conference on “Shaping European economic and social policies in times of uncertainty”. The conference was organised by the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches. We met with Members of the European Parliament, representatives of the EU Presidency and of the European Commission. As a result of our discussions, we would like to share with you our assessment of the economic and social situation in Europe based on the experiences in our communities. As Christians our primary concern are the people and their well-being. This is part of our commitment to love our neighbours.

We are convinced that the current crisis is much more profound than the analysis of the EU institutions has suggested so far. The crisis calls into question a number of assumptions, which have underpinned the EU’s economic policies over the last decades, such as deregulation, the primacy of economic criteria in all areas of life as well as an overemphasis on profit and growth. The current crisis is to a large extent a crisis of trust towards the financial and political institutions and towards the system, which provoked it.

The crisis has an important ethical dimension: Our societies are suffering from a lifestyle which is focusing on individual profit, consumption and greed rather than taking responsibility for the common good, the well-being and the future for all people and for the world we are living in.

The economic crisis has to be seen in connection with other major challenges that we are facing: climate change, crisis of energy and of water supply, shortage of food, which have a significant impact in many regions of our world. The challenges of demographic change urge us towards more sustainable policies. A coherent answer to this range of political challenges is required.

Assuming that this approach is correct, we are concerned that the measures that have been taken by the EU and its Member States so far may not solve the problem, but may simply deal with its symptoms.

To stimulate consumption would only increase already existing imbalances, plundering natural resources, evoking irreversible changes of the earth’s climate and destroying natural biodiversity. Producing extensive public debts is unsustainable, unethical and unacceptable and will only postpone the crisis, but not contribute to its solution.

The European churches understand this crisis as a call for change. Coming back to “business as usual” will not solve it. To meet the challenges of the crisis it will be necessary to come to significant changes in the economic and social policies of the European Union and its Member States.

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Change would mean to translate EU's values more strongly into economic as well as social and environmental policies. The Lisbon Treaty sets out the EU's value basis as "respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, ...justice, solidarity and equality between women and men" (Art. 2). It describes full employment and social progress, a high level of protection and the improvement of the quality of the environment as essential elements of a "highly competitive social market economy" (Art. 3). A social and ecological assessment of all measures taken by the European Union and its Member States could therefore ensure a sustainable response to the economic crisis.

Change would mean to substantially revise the Lisbon strategy, which was developed when a lightly regulated market economy appeared to be flourishing. It now becomes evident that the EU's strategy for "growth and jobs" does not provide appropriate instruments for economic recovery. EU's economic forecast shows that Member States with an elaborate social protection system are also economically significantly better placed in meeting the challenges of the current crisis. We ask EU's Member States to take concrete steps in view of creating a mutually supportive interaction between the economic, employment, social and environmental policies. In order to achieve the goal of a European knowledge-based and competitive economy, it is indispensable to invest more in people: in education, professional training, life-long-learning, innovation and research. A high-quality education begins in early childhood and needs support from a well operating social system.

Change would mean to significantly reduce the level of unemployment in the European Union. We are concerned about the increasing segmentation of the labour market, with more and more precarious employment situations and the growing marginalisation of specific groups such as long term unemployed, less skilled people, people with disabilities, or people with a migration background. The current situation provides a fundamental challenge to the functioning of the social systems. In Christian understanding, work is not just a productive factor but also a central element of human personality and of participation in society. In the current crisis learning systems must be accessible and affordable for all members of a society irrespective of the contractual form of employment. Innovative arrangements providing for transitions between jobs without a break in employment in some EU Member States provide promising experience to avoid the loss of work and income.

Change would mean to ensure all people in Europe are enabled to live a dignified life, particularly through the sustainable provision of quality social and health services, essential to ensure people are in a position to take up opportunities. A close cooperation of European institutions, Member States and civil society organisations can provide for a reliable operating environment that enables providers to provide quality integrated services that meet differing needs. EU funding should be used more effectively to reach the most vulnerable. Poverty and social exclusion are often perceived as urban problems. We wonder whether the rural areas in Europe are sufficiently taken into account.

Change would mean to take the outcomes of EU's numerous consultation processes with the people in Europe more seriously. Recognising the complexity of the present crisis, to which no single person or institution has a fully satisfying response, we welcome the commitment of the European Institutions to dialogue with the churches. We firmly believe that our close connection with the widest range of people across Europe (from the privileged to the disadvantaged) contributes to developing more just and sustainable policies for the people of Europe. In this light, we share with you the experiences and aspirations of millions of people from all over Europe.

Brussels, 6 May 2009