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**European Economic and Social Committee**

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## **EESC and Finnish Economic Council's Helsinki Conference:**

### **Jobs, Growth, Ageing Society, Europe – enhanced mobility is an indispensable part of the solution**

**On 4-5 September, in Helsinki, the Economic Council of Finland and the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) jointly held a conference on “Labour Mobility in the Lisbon Agenda” in the presence of Finnish Prime Minister, Matti Vanhanen, and President of the EESC, Anne-Marie Sigmund.**

The aim of the conference, held in the European Year of Workers’ Mobility, was to discuss the role of labour mobility in its different dimensions in job creation and growth in Europe, and policy issues involved.

The material presented in the conference highlighted the importance of labour reallocation between jobs, firms, sectors, regions and countries. Some very recent statistical evidence suggests that reallocation of labour is a key factor in facilitating growth of productivity. At the same time, mobility should be seen as means to foster the personal development of individuals in the perspective of life long learning and European identity.

Data on the degree of labour mobility are not very reliable unfortunately. In particular the intensity of geographical mobility is difficult to compare across countries. Nevertheless it seems safe to say that mobility is in general lower in Europe than in the US and tends to be lower in southern Europe than in the north. Labour mobility between EU member countries is surprisingly low, although the enlargement to east has increased the intra-EU worker flows to some extent.

It also became clear that there are many very understandable reasons why people cannot easily change jobs or the area of residence let alone country. Some of the barriers for geographical mobility are very deep and well founded. For example, surveys suggest that social networks are key for well being and people break such networks only unwillingly even if it would economically beneficial.



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Some other barriers for geographical mobility could be more easily lowered by wise policies. A well functioning housing market is important as are right incentives in the unemployment compensations systems. In lowering barriers to migration between EU member countries for example portability of pension rights and recognition of professional degrees are important. Improving language skills as well as awareness of the cultures of other countries is also instrumental for making migration across countries easier.

Free movement of persons is an important element in the European integration progress and, in fact one of the fundamental rights of European citizens. Therefore many of the participants of the conference welcomed the lifting of the transition rules on migration applied in some member countries with regard to the new member states.

As far as occupational mobility is concerned, a well-functioning education system was identified central. Only if people can learn new competences can they move to new types of jobs. In a rapidly changing working life good basic education and the adherence to the principle of life long learning are very important.

If the Lisbon Agenda's ambitious targets are to be realised the European Union must create a new mobility framework that will effectively remove all practical barriers to free movement and open up the minds of Europeans to the – individual and societal – benefits of a Europe-wide labour market, one in which the social partners could play a more proactive role.

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