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Launch of the European Multi-Stakeholder Forum on CSR

Address by Philippe de Buck, Secretary General

UNICE believes that business, large or small, has an important role to play in contributing to sustainable economic, environmental and social development in the societies in which it operates.

UNICE therefore welcomes the debate on corporate social responsibility. UNICE and its member federations are committed to play an active role in this debate at various levels and actively to promote responsible business conduct throughout Europe and the world.

For UNICE, recognition of the following fundamental principles is however essential in the *European* debate on CSR:

- CSR is voluntary and business-driven
- There is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to CSR. In order to be successful, CSR policies must be developed from within the organisation and be adapted to its specific characteristics and circumstances.
- CSR is inextricably linked to the three pillars of sustainability relating to economic, social and environmental considerations. The multi-disciplinary character of responsible business conduct and its potential for improving companies' total performance make CSR a horizontal issue, which should consequently also be explored horizontally at Commission level and be seen in the light of the Lisbon competitiveness agenda.
- Moreover, with companies operating throughout the world, CSR needs to be seen in a global rather than a purely European context.
- And finally, CSR is not about shifting public responsibilities on to private companies.

CSR is not about avoiding or substituting legislation, as some fear. CSR is about companies taking up their responsibility to contribute to sustainable development over and above the respect of legislation and internationally agreed standards.

At the same time, any debate on CSR has to respect the distribution of roles between governments and companies: it should not overlook the responsibilities of governments and multilateral organisations themselves when it comes to the promotion of democracy and human rights and the development of adequate legal, economic and social frameworks.

UNICE will support the Commission in those activities promoting CSR at European level, which are developed along the line of these principles. Such activities should focus on motivating businesses to develop their own tailor-made CSR policies and fostering innovation in the field of CSR.

In the light of the above, UNICE welcomes the creation of a European Multi-Stakeholder Forum on CSR. The creation of a place for an open debate about various CSR issues and for exchange of experiences is an appropriate means to bring the promotion of CSR forward.

UNICE will fully support activities at European level that will bring major stakeholders together which focus on:

1. raising the level of understanding of CSR by fostering dialogue between the business community, trade unions, NGOs and other relevant players;
2. raising awareness about the variety of existing, widely recognised CSR instruments and initiatives;
3. fostering exchanges of experiences and exchanges about CSR practices and instruments, thereby enabling a constructive dialogue about concrete cases and issues.

It would however be inappropriate to conceive the forum as a place where the participants are expected to negotiate or define guidelines or guiding principles. Businesses should be encouraged and not hindered in their attempts to find dynamic and innovative solutions.

Challenges facing business such as calls for convergence, transparency and accountability of their CSR practices will be taken up by business itself. Whereas it is useful to have a debate about these challenges, they will and have to be addressed through market-driven responses. There is no room at this stage for prescriptive approaches.

A balanced composition of the Forum and particularly its Round Tables is an important factor for the Forum's success. Ensuring an appropriate involvement of employer and business organisations is crucial, as is the involvement of "CSR practitioners" (companies). It would be a fundamental error to disregard the fact that CSR is essentially a company management issue, and therefore companies have a main role to play in informing the debate.

UNICE welcomes the creation of four Round Tables around the proposed broad themes. For practical and organisational reasons, the Round Tables need to be launched successively and in a balanced way.

We look forward to discussions in the coordination committee to organise the Forum in the most logical, effective and transparent way.

Appropriate time needs to be given to designing the follow-up structure and preparing future work, in order to get the process off on the right footing and establish the Forum as a central place for debating CSR and taking the issue forward at EU level.

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