

Speaking Note Mr. Hans Maertens
ESF Kick-off event 'Social partners on the digital fast track'
22 February 2018

Welcome and introduction

Ladies and gentlemen, dear participants of this kick-off event of the ESF-project 'Social partners on the digital fast track'.

I am very pleased to welcome you today at the Social and Economic Council of Flanders, or, the SERV. You are at the moment in the house of the Flemish social partners, in the building of Flemish social dialogue, right in the heart of Brussels. A very special and warm welcome goes to our foreign friends and **partners in the ESF-project**. We have with us:

- a trade union partner of the Czech republic
- partner organisations of 3 German Länder: Sachsen, Sachsen-Anhalt and Nordrhein-Westfalen
- and colleagues of the social and economic councils of the autonomous region of Valencia in Spain and of the region Auvergne-Rhone-Alpes in France.

As to the Flemish participants, we are very pleased that you massively expressed your interest in this event. We are happy to welcome not only representatives from trade unions and employer's associations but also representatives of government organisations, social dialogue institutions, think tanks, sectoral institutions, knowledge institutions and so on ...

The SERV and digitalisation

We are gathered here today to talk about **digitalisation**. Three years ago, the SERV has put digitalisation on top of the list of priorities of topics we thought would be of uttermost importance in the future.

In 2016 and 2017, our study departments extensively studied the field. They produced basic discussion texts and analyses of the most striking challenges that digitalisation and robotisation poses for us as social partners but also for the broader society.

In the beginning of this year, we have written a shared **vision statement** that is agreed on by all social partners. With this common vision, we have taken the first step in developing a comprehensive policy agenda for digitalisation and robotisation and we are leaping forward to develop concrete actions and activities. We want to realise this agenda together with the Flemish Government but also among social partners ourselves and last but not least within sectors, companies and on the workfloor.

Later this morning two staff members of the SERV-secretariat will present this vision statement on digitalisation, so I will not dwell on this in too much detail.

The ESF-project

Needless to say that we are not the only region in Europe that is faced by digitalisation and neither do we have to reinvent the wheel when we think about a good policy mix to answer the challenges that digitalisation poses.

All over the world, digitisation, robotisation, artificial intelligence, big data, augmented reality and so on ... are hot topics. They create not only excitement and optimism but also uncertainty and perhaps even fear. We have invited Mr. **Robert Went** from the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy to give an overview of the challenges and opportunities and to offer potential answers to these challenges.

We are certain that this morning, and especially the keynote on robots, digital possibilities and artificial intelligence, will pose a perfect **start of our international project** 'Social partners on the digital fast track'. Simultaneously with the rollout of our own activities on digitalisation, we also responded to a project call from the European Social Fund for transnational cooperation and with the goal of expanding our actions and view to the European level.

We managed to find **partners in various EU-member states** that clearly share our concerns and also acknowledge the importance of the digital revolution. These partners – which I have already introduced to you - are either representing social partners or they operate in the realm of social partnership. A special thank therefore to the people of the Flemish European Social Fund in the room for creating this window of opportunity.

Perhaps also interesting to mention is that this project initially received the draft title "Are social partners afraid from digitalisation?". However, the executive committee of the SERV countered this somewhat fearful approach and proposed a new title: social partners on the digital fast track. We believe in positive changes and we want - in a pragmatic way – to **embrace and steer digitalisation without being driven by fear**.

Few are probably aware that a transnational ESF-project also need **Flemish partners**. For us, setting up such a partnership was very easy because the SERV is "in se" a partnership organisation composed of trade unions and employers' organisations. Obviously, our partners are the social partners of Flanders and their representatives are also present today.

What is the goal of the ESF-project? Well, due to digitalisation, the way we will work and live in the future is going to change dramatically. Automation and artificial intelligence could make many manual, repetitive jobs obsolete. The predictions are numerous but also vary a lot. One thing is clear: digitalisation will impact our whole way of living.

In the ESF project we will try to look forward, analyse and capture the effects of digitalisation on social dialogue and on labour market relations. This will be rather challenging as some of the futurologists and trend watchers are already predicting the end of the social model and of the social dialogue as we know it.

During the ESF-project, the partners will organize **four roundtables on various topics**: skills and competences, labour market and work organization, regional economic policy and innovation and the process of social dialogue. Each of these round tables will take place in another country/region and will be set up around a set of key questions. Moreover, they will be combined with **best practice visits in the different countries**.

Tomorrow, for instance, the partnership will visit the company Janssen Pharmaceuticals in Beerse that is part of the international group Johnson & Johnson. We are proud to have this absolute top company in our programme. In the sector of pharmaceuticals the necessity of innovation is huge and partnerships are essential to drive change. At Janssen we will learn about the newest developments in patient care, therapies, medicines and tool kits that are combining mobile technology through smartphone apps. But we will also meet with the employee representatives, who will show us insight into how digitalisation impact the workforce.

Throughout the project, the **common thread will be the role of social dialogue**. In the end we hope to have learned more on the strength of social dialogue and the social partners. And hopefully we will also know more on the weaknesses and the threats, and learn from each other how we can try to cope with the digital revolution, the expected change in jobs and job profiles and the effects on social protection and the income inequality. At the concluding event of this project, which is foreseen in June 2019, the conclusions of all the round tables will be presented. The audience of today is already invited to take part.

We, and our international partners, **have high expectations of this project**. Not only sharing knowledge and experience is key. We also want to learn how employee participation looks like in other European countries, what the national strategies are for the future, and how innovation processes are steered in other countries. Other potential questions concern the smart solutions and instruments other partners adopt to cope with digitalisation, how SMEs and their workforce are supported in the digital transition, what digitalisation means for unemployed people and for active labour market policies and so on.

You notice: there are still a lot of questions that require an answer, but this makes perfect sense at the beginning of a project and learning process.

Ending notes

Let's us now continue with the programme of today, and perhaps already indicate some potential answers or solutions to these questions. Peter Van Humbeeck and Tim Buyse will now present the main findings as well as the vision text of the SERV.

I wish you a successful and fruitful kick-off and I hope to see you again on one of the expert roundtables or the closing event.