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THE EUROPEAN TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

CSR is defined as “a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis”.

In recent years, CSR has gained growing recognition as a new and emerging form of governance in business. It is already established in a global context, with international reference standards set by the United Nations, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) guidelines and International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions.

CSR applies to a wide variety of company activities, especially in enterprises that operate multinationally in very different social and environmental settings. But it is a voluntary system, and as such, lacks objective, consistent and transparent criteria for workers, consumers and other stakeholders to measure company performance.

Since 2000, the European Union has been engaged in developing a European Framework for CSR, with tools for assessing standards. At the end of June 2004, the European Multi-Stakeholder Forum on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR EMS Forum) reports on these issues. Trade unions have played an active role, and the ETUC at its last Executive Committee meeting approved a series of priorities for CSR in Europe.

Adopting CSR is said to be in the long-term interests of companies since – in an age of increasing, worldwide consumer awareness – it improves their public image and wins over new customers. The ETUC, however, insists that CSR must not be merely a public relations exercise, but a sustained and challenging effort. CSR must not be a way to avoid dialogue with workers organised in trade unions, or

an alternative to labour legislation and collective bargaining.

The ETUC affirms that the prime concern of CSR must be the quality of industrial relations within a company. It would, indeed, be a contradiction in terms for a firm that fails to apply a collective agreement or respect an employment contract to be regarded as ‘socially responsible’.

A business can only claim publicly to be responsible if it first applies the highest standards internally.

This means:

- Respecting industrial relations;
- Promoting workers’ participation through consultation and information procedures, particularly within European Works Councils;
- Developing vocational skills and lifelong training for workers;
- Respecting health and safety standards and adopting preventive measures;
- Promoting gender equality;
- Finding ways for the social partners to work together especially in anticipating and managing change and restructuring;
- Promoting the social rights of workers;
- Enhancing the quality of work;
- Defending and integrating vulnerable groups such as young and disabled people and immigrants.

Key steps of CSR in the European Union:

1995	European Commission President Jacques Delors and a group of European companies launch the <i>Manifesto of Enterprises against Social Exclusion</i> .
March 2000	Lisbon European summit sets new strategic goal of making Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. For the first time, the European Council makes a special appeal to "companies' corporate sense of social responsibility regarding best practices on lifelong learning, work organisation, equal opportunities, social inclusion and sustainable development".
June 2000	EU adopts Social Policy Agenda, stressing the importance of CSR in adapting working conditions to the new economy.
March 2001	European Council in Stockholm welcomes business initiatives to promote CSR and calls for a wide exchange of views around the forthcoming Green Paper.
July 2001	European Commission publishes the Green Paper on promoting a European framework for CSR (COM/2001/366).

July 2001	European Commission Communication on promoting core labour standards.
October 2001	ETUC Executive Committee adopts a wide-ranging policy on CSR.
July 2002	European Commission Communication on Corporate Social Responsibility: A business contribution to sustainable development (COM/2002/347).
October 2002	European Commission sets up European Multi-Stakeholder Forum on CSR (CSR EMS Forum) to exchange good practices and assess common guidelines.
June 2004	ETUC Executive Committee adopts resolution laying down a series of priorities for the development of CSR in Europe.
29 June 2004	CSR EMS Forum to report to European Commission.

Useful links

European trade unions and Corporate Social Responsibility

Final report by the ETUC:

<http://www.etuc.org/EN/Dossiers/infocons/default.cfm>

United Nations: <http://www.unrisd.org/>

ILO: <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/basi/vpisearch.welcome>

OECD: http://www.oecd.org/document/49/0,2340,en_2649_34813_31530865_1_1_1_1,00.html

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