

SECRETARIAT GENERAL

DIRECTORATE GENERAL I – HUMAN RIGHTS AND RULE OF LAW

DIRECTORATE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

DEPARTMENT OF THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL CHARTER



Strasbourg, 6 September 2013

MISSCEO(2013)6

**MUTUAL INFORMATION SYSTEM ON SOCIAL PROTECTION
OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE
(MISSCEO)**

15th meeting
Strasbourg, 4 and 5 July 2013

MEETING REPORT

I. OPENING OF THE MEETING

Mr Karl-Friedrich Bopp, Head of Division, in the Chair, opened the meeting. He welcomed participants and introduced members of the Secretariat who were now dealing with the MISSCEO network. The list of participants and Secretariat appear in Appendix I. He informed participants that a Session of the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR) was also taking place that week in Strasbourg.

Mr Régis Brillat, Head of the Department of the European Social Charter, also welcomed participants and thanked them for their commitment to MISSCEO. He emphasised that the two networks, MISSCEO and MISSOC, were very important for the department's work related to social security and were often used by the ECSR when preparing conclusions of conformity with the European Social Charter. The Department of the European Social Charter was now responsible, following structural changes in the Secretariat last year, for work on social security, including MISSCEO. A main aim was to ensure the efficient working of the Governmental Committee of the European Social Charter and the European Code of Social Security, which dealt with follow-up to the Conclusions of the ECSR on the European Social Charter (hereinafter "the Charter"), as well as follow-up to the Conclusions of the Committee of Experts of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) on the European Code of Social Security (hereinafter "the Code"). A second aim was to ensure the joint implementation of cooperation programmes relative to the Charter and the Code. The Department had also fixed a third objective, which was the convergence of the two websites to improve harmonisation and links for information on the Charter and social security.

II. ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

The agenda, which appears in Appendix II, was adopted.

The Chair informed participants that Mr Ewen would first provide information on MISSCEO and then Mr Coucheir would give a presentation on MISSOC.

III. INFORMATION FROM THE SECRETARIAT

The Secretariat reported on developments in the Council of Europe since the MISSCEO's 14th meeting (July 2012).

The articles of the Charter under examination in 2013 concerned the thematic group on health, social security and social protection, including Article 12 on "The right to social security". National reports of States Parties were being assessed by the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR) with a view to adoption of Conclusions at the end of 2013 on the conformity, or non-conformity, of national law and practice with respect to these articles.

A meeting of the Governmental Committee of the European Social Charter and the European Code of Social Security had been held on 27-31 May 2013, and government representatives at the meeting had been provided with an update of information concerning the MISSCEO network.

The Governmental Committee had adopted draft Resolutions on the application of the European Code of Social Security and its Protocol by Contracting Parties, and these had been submitted to the Committee of Ministers' Rapporteur Group, GR-SOC, for adoption at its meeting on 9 July 2013, with a view to formal adoption by the Committee of Ministers later in the year.

Concerning the situation for MISSCEO, the 2012 data was available on the Council of Europe's social security website. The preparation for MISSCEO 2013 was underway and nearly all of the updated contributions had been received from country correspondents. Following the accession of Croatia to

the European Union, it was part of the MISSOC network, and the MISSCEO network was now composed of 12 member states of the Council of Europe and 3 observer countries.

Finally, participants were informed that the name of the department had been shortened to the Department of the European Social Charter, but there was no change concerning the work being carried out, which included activities on MISSCEO and the European Code of Social Security.

IV. INFORMATION ON MISSCEO

Mr Claude Ewen, Consultant, gave a presentation on the background, evolution and future challenges for the MISSCEO network. A translation of his presentation which was made in French appears in Appendix III. Mr Ewen stressed the important aim of MISSCEO to enable European citizens to obtain information on social security legislation and rights.

Mr Brillat thanked Mr Ewen for his presentation and said that the current Secretariat was strongly committed to the work of MISSCEO. Concerning some of the points raised, it was necessary to take into account the current context of budgetary constraints which had been put in place by the Council of Europe's member states. With respect to the numerous reporting requirements for the Charter, the Code and MISSCEO, Mr Brillat said that an overlap sometimes existed and improvements may be possible with a view to the mutual sharing of information. Participants were reminded that an individual country could make a voluntary contribution in support of a specific activity, if it so wished. Finally, Mr Brillat underlined the importance of working together in an efficient way and said that the current context, although difficult, also offered many opportunities.

Concerning the points raised by Mr Ewen on the relationship between MISSCEO and MISSOC, Mr Schoukens believed that it was important for MISSCEO to adopt a more active role in ascertaining its own objectives rather than passively following changes in MISSOC. He believed that MISSCEO had an active role to play in providing social security information, which was useful in the monitoring of the Charter and the Code.

V. INFORMATION ON MISSOC

Mr Michael Coucheir, Team Leader of the MISSOC Secretariat, gave a presentation on recent developments in MISSOC which concerned activities since July 2012, followed by a focus on future activities.

There had been two updates, in English, French and German, of the MISSOC comparative tables, organisation charts and appendices since the last meeting of MISSCEO, one in July 2012 and the other in January 2013. Following an in-depth review, a revised version of the Correspondents' Guidelines on Table IV on maternity/paternity benefits had been produced, which were reflected in the January 2013 update. This improved consistency of information, provided for the inclusion of paid paternity and adoption leave and clarified the delineation with Table IX on family benefits. Concerning the discussion on harmonisation of the two networks, Mr Coucheir said that the MISSCEO network may find it more suitable to decide on a case-by-case basis whether to adopt the same changes as MISSOC.

Mr Coucheir presented an outline of work which was underway for the inclusion of Croatia's tables in the MISSOC which would be published in December 2013, and expressed appreciation that this work had been greatly facilitated by the former participation of Croatia in the MISSCEO network. Information was provided on the annual update of the MISSOC Guides, which were citizen-friendly overviews of national social security systems and available in all EU languages. A MISSOC report had been published on gender differences in social protection and a report was underway on means-testing in MISSOC countries. Communication and promotion methods were presented and information provided on website developments, which included a link to MISSCEO. Developments had also been introduced to the

comparative tables database. Future activities would include a revision of Guidelines for Table VI on old-age and the elaboration of a report on external aspects of social security. Finally, participants were informed that a closer collaboration was planned between the three networks, MISSOC, ASISP and the Network of Independent Experts on Social Inclusion under the umbrella of the Social Policy Network.

Mr Coucheir, in reply to a question from Mr Schoukens, explained that the revised Guidelines clarified the information which belonged to Table IV on maternity/paternity and Table IX on parental benefits. Cross references were made in cases where there was an intertwining of information in different categories. Mr Ewen drew attention to the legal impact of the way in which benefits were categorised as the tables, although not legally binding, could be used to defend citizens' rights to claims.

A round table discussion then took place, during which MISSCEO correspondents explained the situation in their country concerning benefits/leave at the time of birth and for raising a child, and for whom this was granted. In some cases, the system in place only applied to mothers. In other cases, leave for the father was granted in special circumstances instead of the mother, and in some countries, either the mother or father was entitled to leave. Mr Schoukens observed that sometimes systems were in place for paternity leave but these had not been reported as the table referred to maternity leave. If the MISSCEO network decided, in the same way as MISSOC, to refer to maternity/paternity, then it would be necessary to specify clearly for whom the entitlement was granted in order to ensure comparability of information. An update of the Manual could provide clarification to correspondents for filling in the table.

The participants decided that the MISSCEO table, currently "maternity", would become "maternity/paternity" as from the 2014 edition.

Concerning other changes which MISSOC had introduced, Mr Coucheir would provide the MISSCEO network with the new Guidelines, highlighting the parts where changes had been introduced, which could be discussed by MISSCEO at its next meeting. The Chair proposed that decisions on changes, in view of harmonisation of the two networks, could be taken on a case-by-case basis. Mr Ewen underlined the importance of maintaining the same structure as MISSOC, for example, the same columns or the naming of categories, although the approach to filling in the tables could be adapted to the specific needs of the MISSCEO network.

Mr Schoukens then raised the question of the EU seeking information on social security systems in countries outside the EU and wished to know if MISSCEO had an active role to play in coordination. Mr Coucheir said that the EU's external dimension of social security coordination had, indeed, become more important. It wished to have a clearer view of bilateral agreements in place between member states of the EU with non-EU countries in the field of social security, with a view to improving a coordinated approach. Another area of focus concerned the safeguarding of equal treatment with regard to pension rights for EU nationals living in non-EU countries. Information on these questions was being gathered by means of a questionnaire. Further discussions on issues of coordination appear under point VIII of this report.

VI. GENERAL COMMENTS ON COMPARABILITY

Mr Schoukens made a number of comments on the 2013 edition of the MISSCEO tables. All countries had sent updates of their tables, except the Russian Federation which was due to the fact that it had a new correspondent.

Mr Schoukens raised the following points:

- problems had again arisen, often related to translation difficulties, which made the redrafting of some texts necessary, thereby leaving less time to deal with the contents;
- it was important to ensure a harmonious presentation of the tables and avoid the use of different fonts and formatting when introducing changes which might appear, by error, in the final version;
- in the tables on 'Financing', confusion could arise concerning groups which were not insured, which was often the case for medical care, as it was not clear who was paying for the care. If correspondents mentioned that the state was paying for non-insured groups, it was often not clear if tax money was being sent to the scheme or whether the public authorities were paying the contributions for those groups;
- when a full list of categories was provided, for example, lists of sub-schemes or sub-categories detailing different percentages of coverage, it was important to clearly distinguish between categories, by using bullet points or dashes;
- it was up to each correspondent to decide whether to present information in a general manner by simply referring to exceptions or to go into great detail. If providing details, then a clear structure for presentation of information was important;
- when using a concept which was specific to a country, such as the "social package" which was referred to in the tables for Armenia, correspondents were asked to provide a brief explanation. If necessary, cross-references to an explanation in another table could be made;
- problems were seen in the presentation of information on benefits which could, in some circumstances, be accumulated with other forms of income. Rather than simply stating that accumulation was possible, it was better to provide a short explanation. In other cases, a great deal of detail was provided, and such differences in presentation could create problems for comparability;
- concerning the applicable statutory basis, a difficulty had arisen due to reference being made to the status of a law. It was only necessary to refer to legislation actually in place, thus the applicable law;
- concerning survivors and family benefits, some countries referred to the entitlement of specific groups, such as children up to a certain age, however did not remain coherent throughout the table;
- the use of the terms 'in principle' and 'normally' caused difficulties in comprehension and it was useful to refer to the nature of the exceptions, without necessarily providing full details.

Mr Schoukens also observed the systematic reporting by Turkey on civil servants and other wage earners and he questioned whether this should be continued although it was for Turkey to take this decision. He pointed out that Turkey was the only country to present information in this way so it was not suitable for comparability and it involved more preparatory work.

The Chair invited correspondents to discuss the above issues. A discussion was held on the problem of references to the status of laws. Mr Schoukens added that some countries referred only to the basic act whilst others put in a detailed list of the executing acts, but it was for countries to decide on the extent of the information included. It was, however, advisable not to put in comments on the acts and if the law had been repealed, then it was better not to include it in the table.

The Chair pointed out that it was important that the tables contained information only on legislation in force which reflected the situation on 1 January 2013.

The correspondent for Serbia mentioned a problem of reflecting the situation of legislation in force on 1 January 2013, as the Pension and Insurance law had just changed in his country which meant that benefits had been affected. If further information was not included, the situation would not be clear for the reader.

Mr Schoukens said that the general principle should be applied, as strictly as possible, to include only information on legislation in force, unless the correspondent felt that an important change had taken place which needed to be mentioned in order to give some proper sense to the information.

The Chair concluded the discussion, saying that the general rule applied that tables contained information only on legislation actually in force on 1 January 2013. However, a correspondent could refer to an important change in legislation which had taken place later in the year, if he or she felt that it would be absurd not to mention it.

VII. COMPARATIVE EXERCISE

The aim of the comparative exercise was to encourage MISSCEO correspondents to study the tables from the point of view of the reader rather than the author. This year, correspondents had been asked to read, prior to the meeting, Table 10 “Unemployment” and Table 11 “Guaranteed minimum resources”, in order to discuss and comment on them during the meeting.

During the meeting, correspondents were divided into six groups of countries (Albania and Armenia, Azerbaijan and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Georgia and Moldova, Montenegro and the Russian Federation, Serbia and “The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, Turkey and Ukraine) in order to discuss the tables. Each group presented its comments and the following conclusions emerged from the discussions:

- the presentation of information could enable the reader to easily identify common areas for main conditions as well as differences in details;
- cross references between tables were useful in order to avoid the repetition of information;
- information which was relative to labour law rather than social security was often not included in the tables;
- the terminology used could make some information difficult to understand and needed an additional brief explanation;
- well-structured information, presented with bullet points when it was very detailed, made it clearer;
- comprehension for the reader was sometimes facilitated by a basic knowledge of the system;
- omission of information could occur by error during the update of tables. Correspondents had to be careful, when updating their tables, to copy all the information contained in the table cell concerned into the next column and then introduce the changes, rather than simply indicating the words to be changed.

VIII. INTRODUCTIONS TO THE TABLES SUMMARISING THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SOCIAL SECURITY SYSTEMS

Introductions on the principal characteristics of social security systems prepared for the 14th meeting of MISSCEO had been brought together in document MISSCEO (2013) 5 for discussion and follow-up. Since the last MISSCEO meeting, several countries had prepared revised versions.

Mr Schoukens said that the idea of the introductions was to provide an insight into aspects of information which were not apparent in the tables and for these to be published on the website alongside the tables. Following on from discussions held at the last meeting, the idea was to make them more structured. They were to give a brief vision of protection of human and social rights with regard to social security, the legal value of these rights as constitutional rights were very different in each country, and provide information on the organisation of access to the judiciary. The text for “The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” was being used as a model for the presentation of other texts.

Correspondents provided information on the state of progress concerning their texts and agreed to submit revised versions, if this was required, by 30 September 2013.

Mr Schoukens would send revised texts, with track changes, to the Secretariat for a language review, and the country correspondents concerned would be asked to confirm the final version.

The correspondent for Albania asked whether the process of coordination of social security should be included in the information. Mr Schoukens said that this was an important area of information and suggested that this could belong to a separate document, pointing out a concrete link to Article 12, paragraph 4, of the Charter, which referred to the coverage of migrants. Mr Ewen agreed that, indeed, it was worthwhile considering such a proposal, which would concern information on discussions of association agreements with the European Union. A further step could be to provide a list of bilateral agreements in the field of social security of a MISSCEO country with another country. It would be important to distinguish between association agreements with the European Union and bilateral agreements between countries.

The Chair informed participants that the Conclusions of the ECSR concerning Article 12 would be published at the end of 2013/beginning of 2014. A separate document on coordination information could be envisaged, on the basis of a model prepared by one country. Mr Schoukens proposed to prepare, in collaboration with Mr Ewen, a set of questions which could serve as a basis for drawing up an initial document on coordination. The correspondent for “The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” agreed to prepare an initial document which would serve as a model for other countries.

The Chair concluded the discussion by saying that the preparation of a document on coordination would be on the agenda of the next meeting of MISSCEO.

IX. EVOLUTION OF NATIONAL SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS

Correspondents had been asked to give a brief presentation of the main developments that had occurred in their national social protection systems. A round table was held, during which correspondents provided information on developments that had taken place in their social protection systems in 2012 and the first half of 2013. It was decided that correspondents, if they had not already done so, would forward their contribution to the Secretariat as soon as possible following the meeting and, at the latest, by 30 September 2013.

The texts would be used by Mr Schoukens in the preparation of a document on recent trends and developments in social protection with a view to it being published on the social security website.

X. PREPARATION OF THE 2013 EDITION

The information in the tables should reflect the situation on 1 January 2013.

The following timetable for the preparation of the 2013 edition was confirmed:

- The MISSCEO correspondents would revise their national contributions in the light of the discussions held at the meeting and the content co-ordinator's comments, by 30 September 2013;
- The final version of national contributions following revision by the Secretariat would be available by 31 October 2013;
- The MISSCEO data 2013 (English version) would be entered by the Secretariat into the Council of Europe database in early November 2013;
- The MISSCEO 2013 data would be translated into French in November 2013;
- The French version of the MISSCEO 2013 data would be entered into the database in December 2013/January 2014.

XI. PLANNING OF THE 2014 EDITION

The information in the tables should reflect the situation on 1 January 2014.

The following timetable for the preparation of the 2014 was approved:

- The Secretariat would request the national contributions in January 2014;
- The MISSCEO correspondents would update their national contributions by 1 April 2014;
- The comments on the national contributions would be ready by 2 May 2014;
- The 16th MISSCEO meeting would take place on 3-4 July 2013 (see also point XII below);
- The MISSCEO correspondents would revise their national contributions in the light of the discussions held at the annual meeting and the comments of the coordinator of contents, by 22 September 2014;
- The final version of national contributions would be ready after supervision by the Secretariat by 17 October 2014;
- The MISSCEO data 2014 (English version) would be entered into the Council of Europe data base by mid-November 2014;
- The 2014 MISSCEO data would be translated into French in October 2014;
- The French data of the MISSCEO 2014 would be uploaded in December 2014/January 2015.

XII. DATE AND PLACE OF THE NEXT MEETING

The 16th meeting of MISSCEO would be held on 26-27 June 2014 in Strasbourg, as a Session of the European Parliament was scheduled for the first week of July.

APPENDIX I

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APPENDIX II
DRAFT AGENDA

THURSDAY, 4 JULY 2013

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FRIDAY, 5 JULY 2013

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APPENDIX III

Translation of statement in French

by Mr Claude EWEN at the MISSCEO meeting

(Strasbourg 4+5.7.2013)

The MISSCEO network – background, evolution and future challenges

Before giving you some information about the background, evolution and future challenges of the network, I will start with the basics.

MISSCEO is an abbreviation, the full official name of the network being “MUTUAL INFORMATION SYSTEM IN SOCIAL SECURITY OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE”.

This acronym was deliberately chosen for its similarity to MISSOC, which stands for “MUTUAL INFORMATION SYSTEM IN SOCIAL SECURITY OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY”. MISSOC, then, is an information exchange network that operates at European Union level.

It is not only the names that are alike: the two networks also have a common design and operating method. MISSCEO has always modelled itself on MISSOC with regard to both its organisational structure and its activities. MISSOC has always been a sort of guiding light where MISSCEO is concerned.

I will return to these points in the second part of my statement when I talk about the development and strengths of the MISSCEO and MISSOC networks, and again in the third part when outlining future challenges. First, though, some background details.

- Background

- MISSCEO came into being on 6 December 1999 when the first meeting of the network took place here in Strasbourg. I remember this initial meeting very well because it was not a particularly easy one. The aim of the event was to convince participants of the usefulness, importance or even necessity of creating an information exchange network with all the extra work that that entailed, but also all the benefits that such a network would bring. At that time, the Council of Europe used to publish annual comparative tables on member states' legislation, providing information about the social security legislation of all forty or so countries. What was it that prompted the Council of Europe's leaders to make the move from a paper publication to a fully-fledged information exchange network?
- At the time, the European Union already had an information exchange network, namely MISSOC, and the Council of Europe was inspired by this network's functioning and ideas when setting up MISSCEO.

- Ten years before MISSCEO came into being, in 1990 to be specific, the European Union had decided to set up a formal information exchange network for its member states. Back then, the chief task of this MISSOC network was to compile and update comparative tables on national legislation.
- With the advent of the MISSOC tables, which naturally applied only to European Union countries, the Council of Europe had decided, for obvious economic reasons, to confine its own comparative tables to Council of Europe members which were not in the European Union and therefore not represented in MISSOC.
- In the 1990s, the MISSOC network grew rapidly and the quality of its work improved greatly. Gradually it began to move away from the idea that it should concern itself solely with the publication of comparative tables to become an information exchange network in the true sense, with other activities and publications.
- With each new wave of EU enlargement, MISSCEO lost members, as they migrated to the MISSOC network. In 2004, MISSCEO lost half its participants when Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Cyprus and Malta joined the European Union and, hence too, MISSOC. The same thing happened in 2007 with Romania and Bulgaria. The latest example of this phenomenon of MISSOC expansion and MISSCEO contraction is Croatia, whose correspondent hosted the MISSCEO meeting in Zagreb last year. As of 1 July 2013, Croatia is a member of MISSOC.

One conclusion that I like to draw from the situation is that while MISSCEO may have lost in quantity, it has gained in quality. Which brings me to my second point.

- The evolution and strengths of the two networks

In examining the evolution and in particular the working methods of the two networks, I will focus on what I consider to be three crucial aspects.

1) The similarity that exists between the two networks in terms of the layout of the comparative tables. Generally speaking, the MISSOC network may be said to function well. It has a large secretariat to carry out the ongoing task of making improvements to the comparative tables. Since its inception, therefore, MISSCEO has been happy to adopt the table layout as decided and amended over the years by MISSOC. There are two advantages to this:

+ convenience for the reader, who effectively has two different instruments at his or her disposal: the comparative tables of the European Union and those of the Council of Europe. These instruments, however, are completely superimposable, making it easy for the reader to compare the legislation of, for instance, Armenia, which is a member of the MISSCEO network, with, for instance, Germany, which is in MISSOC.

+ MISSCEO, which has considerably fewer financial and human resources than MISSOC, does not have to worry about amending the layout of the tables. In a way, responsibility for this task falls to MISSOC, with MISSCEO merely following suit.

The fact that the tables have the same layout also has two drawbacks, however:

- + MISSCEO members are not included in the discussions about the opportunity and the pros and cons of making this or that change to the tables. They have the impression that they have to put up with the consequences of any changes, yet have no say in the decision-making process, potentially leading to problems as regards acceptability and comprehension.
- + the thinking behind MISSCEO states' legislation does not always follow the same logic as that of MISSOC member states. This can create problems for MISSCEO correspondents trying to decide on the best place to provide a particular piece of information that is relevant to an understanding of how the national system works.

Worth noting here is that initially, the MISSOC comparative tables were closely related to Regulation (EEC) No. 1408/71 on the social security rights of migrant workers. This regulation was superseded by the current regulation (EC) No. 883/2004 on the coordination of social security systems. The connection with these two regulations is still evident today in the layout of the comparative tables, which are divided into different chapters. At the time, indeed, some saw the MISSOC tables as a source of information for migrant workers wishing to find out about their rights and duties under the host country's social security system, should they decide to exercise their right to freedom of movement and go and work in another EU country. It was only gradually that this idea of a link to coordination was dropped and the focus shifted to seeking to provide objective information, and in particular information that was comparable across national systems of social protection. Accordingly, other chapters were incorporated in the comparative tables which are no longer directly connected to coordination. I am thinking in particular of the "guaranteed minimum resources" chapter, which, while well suited to countries that have minimum-income-type legislation, is less popular with the MISSCEO network because it poses problems for its members. Also worth citing here is the chapter on long-term care, which does not feature in the legislation of many MISSCEO countries as a specific category of social benefits.

When talking about the layout of the comparative tables and in particular making alterations to them, the underlying question, of course, remains: should the tables be comparative, i.e. allow inter-country comparisons of legislation, or descriptive, i.e. provide information on the relevant law in a particular country. Which brings me to the issue of terminology. In a descriptive exercise, the national correspondent can of course employ the specific terms used in his or her country. Where the aim of the exercise is to make comparisons, however, there is a need to agree on commonly accepted terms, meaning more responsibility for the secretariat which sometimes has to lay down terminology that, although common, is not necessarily familiar to individual countries.

2) The move from paper to electronic format

When the two networks were first set up, the comparative tables appeared in the form of a paper publication, which was printed twice a year in the case of MISSOC and once a year in the case of MISSCEO. The end results were not always very user-friendly, of course, and I remember well MISSOC's last paper publication which ran to over a thousand pages. You can imagine the inconvenience this caused the reader.

The correspondents, meanwhile, were still faced with the thorny question of how to limit the size of their entries compared with those of their colleagues. The biggest problem at the time was the blank spaces that resulted from the fact that some national correspondents provided more information than others. The longest entries always determined the amount of space required in the comparative tables and led to a dramatic increase in the number of pages used. Hence the secretariat's constant efforts to limit the extent of the information provided.

With paper documents, furthermore, updating was always a problem.

With the advent of electronic technologies and on-line publication of the comparative tables, the whole way of working changed, both for the correspondents who provided the information and for the secretariat which processed it. Likewise, new possibilities for the user emerged. Not to mention the chance to reach a wider, yet at the same time more targeted readership.

In any case, the digital and electronic revolution, which has had such a powerful impact on how administrations and ministries operate, has also led to major changes in the MISSCEO and MISSOC networks. On the positive side, I would say that the quality of the output has greatly improved, thus benefiting the user, while the workload has diminished accordingly, thus benefiting the correspondent.

3) The multitude of activities of the MISSOC network and the limitations of MISSCEO

MISSOC is an extremely active and lively information exchange network. Correspondents, moreover, are keen to use it to seek information from their colleagues in other countries if they need such information in their everyday work. It is not unusual to see national correspondents who are working on some domestic law reform asking their colleagues in the network how things are done in their countries. A genuine informal network of co-operation and mutual assistance has sprung up.

MISSOC, furthermore, does not just publish comparative tables but has also engaged in a multitude of other activities over the years that it has been in existence. Some of these were tried and abandoned while others have been kept or developed in other forms. Allow me to give a few examples:

- bulletins have been published under the heading "MISSOC Info". Initially focusing on specific themes, these later developed into an annual overview of major trends in social protection;
- then there is "MISSOC Analysis", which provides an analytical overview of significant developments in selected fields of social protection;
- there have been analyses on specific topics jointly selected by the correspondents, the secretariat and the Commission;
- there have been studies commissioned by the European Commission when it wanted to have a discussion on a particular topic at a particular moment in time;
- at present, one of the MISSOC's flagship activities is the "social security guides" which provide a description of the main features and mechanisms of the various branches of social protection in each country. They aim to explain the different systems in plain language, and in particular to provide information for citizens who are moving around within Europe.

MISSOC has, in any case, always aspired to be a vibrant, dynamic network which, as well as publishing comparative tables, offers its participants a forum for discussion and for sharing their experiences.

It must be said, too, that the European Union's system of rotating presidencies provides a definite boost to the network, because responsibility for organising the MISSOC meeting falls to the country that holds the presidency. Although it receives extensive help from the secretariat, that country has considerable input, not only in terms of the practical arrangements for the meeting but also in terms of influencing the agenda and deciding which items are to have priority.

Like MISSOC, MISSCEO has made attempts to diversify its activities, although these have been more limited, mainly for two reasons:

The first has to do with the frequency of the meetings: twice a year in the case of MISSOC and once a year in the case of MISSCEO. The biggest barrier preventing MISSCEO from expanding its activities, however, is insufficient financial and human resources. This brings me to the third part of my speech, namely the challenges facing your network.

Future challenges

In terms of future challenges, I will say that, at this stage in its life, MISSCEO needs to ask itself two key questions, and the answers to those questions will to some extent determine its future.

- First question: must MISSCEO always look to MISSOC for inspiration on how to organise its work?

A key issue here, of course, is correspondent motivation. It is true that being part of a well-run network and making acquaintances, through professional ties with colleagues from other countries, is considerably rewarding. Nevertheless, working as a correspondent is quite a commitment.

It is interesting to see how MISSOC correspondents' relationship with their respective secretariats have evolved over time. Initially, the "national experts", as they were called then, were freely chosen by the European Commission and received payment from the Commission for the work they did. As, over the years, more and more civil servants began to take over the role of national expert, this system of cash payments was scrapped. The notion of reward still lingered, however, prompting the Commission to begin holding MISSOC meetings in "desirable" locations. This idea that national correspondents should receive payment in kind for their services was abandoned in 2005 when ten new countries joined the European Union. For them, being part of MISSOC was just another obligation which they were required to fulfil as Member States of the European Union. And today it is widely accepted that states simply appoint a competent correspondent who is required to do the work that is asked of them in the network. The fact, however, that they get to attend extremely well-organised meetings in the country holding the presidency shows that, for MISSOC, the idea of some kind of incentive for correspondents has never quite gone away.

Similar thinking seems to have guided MISSCEO because over the years, a number of its meetings have been held in various countries belonging to the network. In my view, this is a practice that we should not be too quick to abandon: the Council of Europe ought to consider occasionally holding meetings in places other than Strasbourg.

One final point to bear in mind when discussing the functioning of the two networks is that in MISSOC there are two representatives per country, whereas in MISSCEO there is only one. This is a significant disadvantage. With two correspondents, there is a definite element of stability. If one of the correspondents has to leave the network for some reason, the second one can always be relied on, who has kept the acquired experience. In the case of MISSCEO, if a correspondent leaves, his/her successor has to start again from the beginning, with obvious detrimental effects on the operation of the network. Note too that the information contained in the comparative tables typically goes beyond the remit of any one national ministry. So again it makes it sense to have two correspondents, belonging to different ministries if necessary.

It is not only the functioning of information networks that is at issue here. There is also the wider question of the functioning of two international bodies which do not, in fact, have the same financial resources available to them. In the case of European Union groups and committees, there are, in principle, always two representatives per member state whereas at the Council of Europe, countries can claim expenses for just one.

The second question is: should MISSCEO not widen its sphere of activity?

As I said just a moment ago, MISSOC has many other activities besides the comparative tables and it might be considered appropriate or even essential that MISSCEO, too, should broaden the scope of its activities, rather than confining itself to comparative tables. It has to be said that previous attempts to do so were not very successful.

If your MISSCEO network wants to be more ambitious, then the Council of Europe will have to make it clear what financial resources it is prepared to make available: secretariat, meetings, number of correspondents and language versions of the comparative tables are but four key areas that need to be considered.

Talking in abstract and intellectual terms about future challenges is all very well but the question of resources needs to be raised too. The last few years have seen an extraordinary dedication from the previous secretariat, which put a tremendous amount of effort into running the network. I particularly wish to pay tribute to Ana Gomez, who was its lynchpin. The new secretariat headed by Sheila Hirschinger has some major responsibilities to take care of. In any event, Ms Hirschinger will not be able to run the network properly unless she has the full co-operation of the correspondents. Allow me therefore to speak for all of us, national correspondents and other experts, and assure her of our wholehearted support in the task that lies ahead. This task is a noble one because it is about realising one of our most cherished ideas: namely, that European citizens must be properly informed about the legislation on social security so as to be aware of their social rights and in a position to exercise them. These same citizens will surely appreciate all the work done under the MISSCEO network.