

Loflied op Lissabon

Is it the great food with the wonderful local wines? Is it the amazing scenery? Is it the people? Why is Portugal, and Lisbon in particular, such a good place to come to an agreement? At least, that's what you're bound to conclude if you consider the amount of recent international documents named "The Lisbon ..."

Having just spent a week in Portugal (Aveiro) to teach a course on Globalisation and the Knowledge Society for an Erasmus Mundus programme in Higher Education, I conclude it must be a combination of them. The great Portuguese atmosphere has in the past ten years led to a wide range of global and European decisions taken in Lisbon. The only problem with this is that it also leads to a great deal of confusion about all these agreements. So what are The Lisbon Convention, The Lisbon Agenda, The Lisbon Treaty and the Lisbon Declaration all about?

The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region - better known as The Lisbon Convention - was developed by the Council of Europe and UNESCO and adopted by national representatives meeting in Lisbon on 8 - 11 April 1997. In the convention, countries have agreed to implement measures to improve the recognition of foreign qualifications, whether for access to higher education, for periods of study or for higher education degrees. Apart from European countries, the Convention has later also been signed and ratified by the United States, Australia, Canada, Israel, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic.

Best known in Europe is probably The Lisbon Agenda (also referred to as The Lisbon Strategy). In March 2000, the EU Heads of States and Governments agreed to make the EU "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy by 2010". They set the target of achieving 3% average economic growth, the creation of 20 million jobs and 3% of GDP spending on R&D (among a wide range of other operational objectives). A mid term evaluation led by former Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok in 2005 showed that the progress made was disappointing due to an overloaded agenda, poor co-ordination and conflicting priorities, but the main critique was on the lack of political will by the member states. The Kok Report led to a relaunch of the Lisbon Agenda in 2005.

After the rejection of the European constitution by the French and Dutch voters in 2005, a stripped down version of the constitution was agreed upon in Lisbon in October this year and was named... **The Treaty of Lisbon**. According to Commission president Jose Manuel Barroso it was with the determination and the competence of the Portuguese Presidency that led to this historic accord. The Treaty is expected to be signed tomorrow (13 December) and - if ratified - will enter into force on the 1st of January 2009. Most important issues are the institutional changes that should lead to greater transparency and less complexity in the decision making processes. But discarding the label 'constitution' and the European anthem might prove to be important symbolic decisions.

And last weekend, the EU leaders met with African leaders in Lisbon and agreed upon... **The Lisbon Declaration**. Although the document itself does not state concrete objectives, the summit could imply an important turning point in the relations between the EU and Africa. With China's (condition-free) investments in Africa growing, many fear a loosening of the conditions that come with the European investments (mainly conditions related to good governance and human rights). A third EU-Africa summit will be held in 2010.

Eric Beerkens