President Nilsson,

Members of the Economic and Social Committee,

Colleagues,

I would like to thank you for the invitation to appear today to discuss the priorities for Ireland’s Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Ireland values the work of the European Economic and Social Committee and is committed to working closely and in partnership with you to advance our shared goal of delivering jobs and growth for Europe and its citizens as we have done in our previous Presidencies.

Ireland considers that active engagement between Civil Society and NGOs and Government is a necessity for a healthy and functioning democracy, whether at local, national or European level. As members of the EESC you play a critical role as a bridge between civil society and the European institutions. I would like to express my gratitude for the work of the Committee, and in particular the 9 Irish members of the EESC for their role in representing the views of Irish civil society.

In preparing for our Presidency the Irish Government engaged in dialogue with many stakeholders, including the EESC, and representatives of a broad range of NGOs and civil society organisations. We listened closely to what partners had to say and our programme reflects this. There is now an overwhelming desire to move beyond simply reactively fighting the effects of the crisis, towards creating the conditions for economic stability, recovery and employment creation in Europe. Our
citizens want change, and we must respond decisively. It is time for us to implement decisions that have been agreed at the highest level, to work together to tackle the same problems that face most Member States, and to deliver tangible results for its citizens.

In drafting our Presidency programme we have sought to place people at the centre of everything that we are doing. One of the core objectives of the Irish Presidency is to promote a people-centred sustainable economic recovery. This is what the Irish Government is doing at home and it is what we are striving to do as Presidency. Rarely have Presidency priorities been so closely aligned with not just Irish, but many other Member States’ national priorities. It means providing stability, recovery, skills and education and above all jobs. It means ensuring that Member States meet their Europe 2020 targets for productivity and social cohesion. In this regard, the Irish Presidency programme priorities closely reflect those of the EESC. The EU has proved in the past that it can deliver real and tangible change for its citizens. Now we must do so again.

2013 coincides with the 40th anniversary of Ireland’s accession to the EU. This gives us an opportunity to reflect on the profound social and economic changes that have benefited the lives of people in Ireland.

European cohesion funds have provided a modern infrastructure for Ireland. The Single Market has transformed our small economy into one of the world’s most open, with a wide and diverse range of trading partners. But the most important benefits of membership have been felt by individual Irish citizens.

Education has been one of the main contributors to social progress in Ireland. Forty years ago 26,000 of our young people went on to third level education, today there are over six times that figure. Of these, thousands have benefited from studying abroad under the Erasmus programme, which was introduced in 1985 by the then Irish Commissioner, Peter Sutherland. The European Social Fund has invested over €6 billion in education, training and employment creation in Ireland. The Erasmus programme and the right to live, sturdy and work across the EU have opened doors to Irish young people and for other Europeans coming to Ireland, and the exchange and confluence of new ideas has transformed Irish society and the Irish economy.

EU membership has also made Ireland a fairer and more equal society, where the rights of all citizens are guaranteed.
The experience of Ireland is not unique, but has been replicated across all Member States.

As we face into the future, we need to rediscover what the EU can achieve when its members and institutions act together to tackle shared challenges.

There is no greater challenge than the current economic crisis and the unacceptably high levels of unemployment—and in particular youth unemployment—that blight our continent. We cannot afford to fail in our responsibility to Europe’s young people; we must act now to ensure that they can fully achieve their potential as citizens of the European Union.

This is why the Irish Presidency is aiming to make significant progress on the Youth Guarantee which was discussed at the informal meeting of Employment and Social Affairs Ministers in Dublin last week. The theme of the meeting was “Getting people into work” and it gave the Presidency an opportunity to discuss the views of Member States on the Commission’s proposal for a Youth Guarantee. I know that the discussions last week were very fruitful and we hope to make significant progress in the negotiations ahead of the formal meeting of Ministers at the end of this month.

To create an environment that generates and sustains job creation, the Presidency is placing a strong emphasis on promoting a more stable economic environment. Economic stability will provide the foundation for recovery and a return to growth. One of our key priorities is the effective implementation of the European Semester process to ensure that Member States take the necessary reforms and actions to meet the Europe 2020 targets for smart and sustainable economic growth.

The Irish Presidency is also prioritising the Banking Union proposals to restore health to Europe’s banking sector, to protect tax payers in the future by preventing a recurrence of past mistakes, and most importantly to get credit flowing again particularly to SMEs to generate growth and employment in Europe’s economy.

SMEs are at the core of the EU economy. They are also therefore at the core of the Irish Presidency programme. We are working to ensure that SMEs have easier access to programmes such as COSME, to reduce their regulatory burden through smart regulation, and to provide enhanced business opportunities by streamlining public procurement rules.

The Presidency has also identified a number of cross-cutting areas which it considers can develop
long-term sustainable economic growth and jobs including for the EU’s small and medium enterprise sector.

The Single Market is one of the great achievements of the EU. Access to the market has been a win-win situation for both business and the EU’s consumers. But more needs to be done to ensure that Europe’s Single Market delivers its full potential and exploits the possibilities presented by the new technologies. This is why the Presidency is placing a strong focus on completing the measures outstanding under the Single Market Act I. We look forward to the publication of the Single Market Act II measures. The Presidency programme also outlines how we are planning to drive the Digital Agenda to generate long-term growth, employment and other benefits, in areas such as education and accessibility.

The Presidency is also working to remove the remaining barriers that curb free movement across the EU by advancing negotiations on pensions portability, the enforcement of the rights of migrant workers and the mutual recognition of professional qualifications.

Ireland, as Presidency, is also placing a strong emphasis on education and training. The aim is to enable citizens across Europe to avail of the opportunities and possibilities that education can offer, regardless of age. I have already mentioned the Youth Employment package with its training and skills elements. At the EPSCO informal Ministerial meeting in Dublin last week discussed issues including ICT up-skilling for workers across the EU. Ireland is also seeking to secure agreement on the Erasmus for All programme. Making progress on the European Social Fund (ESF), the Programme for Social Change and Innovation (PSCI) and the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund (EGF) are also priorities.

The Presidency is also seeking to strengthen the EU’s research and innovation sector through securing agreement on the Horizon 2020 package as well as completing the European Research Area.

In planning for jobs, growth and a better future for Europe’s citizens, we must focus on a strong and robust infrastructure. Sustainable and interconnected networks are critical to Europe’s social and economic development and are thus priorities for the Irish Presidency. The Connecting Europe Facility will determine how the Union’s resources will be invested across Europe primarily in transport and energy infrastructures. The Presidency will also do all that it can to ensure that agreement is reached on cohesion funding at the earliest stage to underpin and support growth and job creation in communities and regions across the EU and to support greater equality and social
The need to support jobs and growth – and to address the challenges of youth unemployment that the Union faces - was a major factor in last week’s European Council discussion of the Union’s Multiannual Financial Framework, the MFF. While the Irish Presidency did not play a formal role in securing a deal on the MFF, we have – like the EESC - consistently argued that the Union’s Budget needed a focus on growth and employment.

I am glad to say that the MFF agreed last Friday has placed us on the right path in achieving this focus. It supports a continuing strong CAP, which gives vital support to the growing and job-creating agri-food industry. Substantial funding has been agreed for the area of Competitiveness for Growth and Jobs, with Erasmus and Research and Development being singled out for real growth.

A new Employment Initiative has been agreed, which includes a new dedicated youth unemployment line of €3 billion available to those Member States with youth unemployment rates above 25%. When added to the funding available under the European Social Fund, it brings targeted spending on youth unemployment to €6 billion. This is very welcome, especially for countries who have particularly suffered from the destruction of human potential that comes with youth unemployment.

As Presidency, it now falls to Ireland to gain the assent of the European Parliament to the MFF deal. The Parliament has made it clear that its agreement is not to be taken for granted, and its ambitions for the MFF did not exactly match those of the Member States. Nevertheless, there is some room for manoeuvre. As Presidency, we have engaged very closely with the Parliament on this and will continue to do so. I am sure that with flexibility and good will on both sides we will be able to reach agreement. This is a major goal of our Presidency.

The Presidency is also seeking to support future economic growth and protect jobs by opening up new markets for European business and exporters through advancing trade negotiations with key partners such as Canada, China, India and Japan.

The US remains one of the EU’s most important bilateral trade partners and I was pleased that in his “State of the Union” speech earlier this week, President Obama gave his support for launching talks on a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. This is good news for the EU and the US and
echoes the call from the European Council last week. Making real progress on this deal is a key priority for the Irish Presidency, and we will hold a special informal meeting of Trade Ministers in Dublin in April as part of that goal.

The Presidency programme seeks long-term sustainable growth that promotes and reinforces social cohesion. Economic development, social cohesion and progress on environmental issues are no longer standalone issues but are rather closely interdependent.

Resource efficiency, sustainable development and the green economy are also features of the Irish programme. In the Environment Council, securing agreement on the 7th Environment Action Programme and delivering progress in international negotiations, particularly on climate change, will be top priorities for the Presidency.

In parallel, the Presidency is driving forward reform of the Common Agriculture Policy and the Common Fisheries Policy to deliver long-term growth but also to assure a sustainable and safe future for both sectors. Ireland is also attaching strong importance to growth in the marine sector, including through the Atlantic Strategy to harness the wealth that Europe’s seas possess in a sustainable way.

Europe also needs a safe, secure and sustainable energy supply to meet its future needs. As Member States move from traditional carbon energy sources to alternatives, especially renewable energy, the EU must play a key coordinating role. In April the Presidency is bringing both energy and environment ministers together for an informal meeting in Dublin to discuss some of these issues. This is one of the reasons why we look forward to reviewing the Opinion that the EESC is drafting on the economic effects of increased renewable technologies on the electricity system which will contribute to discussions on this issue.

The awarding of the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize to the EU serves as a reminder to us all of the values on which the Union was founded. As Presidency, we are working closely with the European External Action Service in placing a particular focus on development, humanitarian policy and fighting the global hunger crisis. EU Development Ministers met in Dublin earlier this week to discuss these topics and to begin looking at the post 2015 Development Framework.

I opened my remarks by outlining how we want our Presidency to be people-centred. The EU needs to work much more intensively to promote real and constructive dialogue and engagement with our
citizens. As part of our Presidency focus on the European Year of Citizens, I discussed this issue at the informal Ministerial meeting that I chaired last month in Dublin. I was also honoured to share the stage with President Nilsson at the opening conference of the European Year of Citizens in January. I am very interested in hearing from members of the Committee on how civil society can further bridge the gap that exists between Brussels and citizens across the EU. The EESC plays a unique role in the EU and your contribution to this ongoing debate is key.

Ireland is now almost two months into its Presidency. Our overriding objective is to serve the EU and its citizens by driving forward positive change and managing the work agenda of the Union as a fair and honest broker. We are strong believers in the EU, and its power for positive change. We are also firmly of the view that the EU is at its most effective and strongest when we work together to achieve results. This is why we will continue to work to reach solutions that involve all Member States and to reach agreement through the Community method of decision-making. The challenges that we face are considerable, but the EU has demonstrated in the past what it can achieve. If we continue to stand together we can again achieve real results.

President Nilsson, in your own programme for the Presidency of the EESC, I know you highlighted the ideas of sustainability and growth. I want to thank all members of the EESC for your continued support and reaffirm that we look forward to working together to achieve our joint goals of delivering a better future for Europe’s citizens.