

FURNITURE

Workers' representatives	European Federation of Building and Woodworkers (EFBWW) (1958) http://www.efbww.org/default.asp?Language=EN
Employers' representatives	European Furniture Manufacturers Federation (UEA) (1950) http://www.ueanet.com/
	European Furniture Industries Confederation (EFIC) (2006) http://www.efic.eu

Sectoral Social Dialogue Committee (SSDC)

Informal working group:	
SSDC:	March 2001
Rules of procedure:	12 March 2001
Work programme:	2007 – 2008 - 2009

[General overview of sector](#)

[Participants and challenges](#)

[Outcomes](#)

[Joint texts](#)

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF SECTOR

The furniture industry, a highly labour-intensive sector in which certain processes are at risk of being relocated elsewhere, is a major player in export markets. It consists of a large number of SMEs, which are faced with the challenge of producing high-quality articles (in terms of technology, aesthetics, planning and design) for sale worldwide.

Work in the furniture sector mainly entails the assembly of various materials (wood, chipboard, plastics, metals, leather, etc.) to produce furniture (cabinets, tables, chairs, kitchen units, etc.).

This sector consists, in Europe, of many small and medium-sized businesses requiring a large workforce. Some of its processes can 'easily' be relocated elsewhere (manufacturing), whereas others cannot (design, distribution and marketing). The sector has more of a presence in [certain countries](#) such as Germany, Italy, France, the United Kingdom, Spain and – among the central and eastern European countries – Poland.

This sector lost more than 35,000 jobs between 2001 and 2003, primarily owing to strong competition from Asian countries where labour is cheaper. The EU-25 had around 1.3 million workers in the furniture sector in 2004. The majority of the 140,000 or so enterprises are small and medium-sized firms employing fewer than 20 workers. Almost all workers (95%) are employed on a full-time basis, and most of them are men with low or medium-level skills.

EU enlargement served as an opportunity to transfer the most labour-intensive work to the central and eastern European countries, where costs are lower.

This sector is a major player in export markets, yet at the same time globalisation and an increase in cheaper imports have forced the industry in Europe to seek competitive advantages and undertake restructuring. (See the FIRST [Furniture Industry in Restructuring: Systems & Tools] report: ["A market-driven approach in the furniture industry"](#)).

Worldwide, furniture production in industrialised countries grew by 14.4% between 2004 and 2006, but in the emerging countries it grew by 57.4% in the same period. While the EU has managed to preserve its position as the world's number-one producer, with a 37% share of total output, Asia (27%) and NAFTA (29%) have become very serious competitors (2006 figures). Under these circumstances, the European industry is faced with the challenge of finding new competitive advantages (product differentiation, an analysis of demand-side purchasing factors, distribution and sales management, etc.).

PARTICIPANTS AND CHALLENGES

The most favoured topics of social dialogue in the furniture sector in recent years have been EU enlargement and extending social dialogue in the new Member States, employment and vocational training, and health and safety issues. This social dialogue brings together the European Federation of Building and Woodworkers (EFBWW) on the workers' side, and the European Furniture Manufacturers Federation (UEA) as well as the European Furniture Industries Confederation (EFIC) on the employers' side.

The European social partners adopted their rules of procedure in 2001, defining the aims of social dialogue as follows: “to give opinions to the Commission on social policy initiatives and on trends in European policy which have an economic or social impact on the Furniture sector” and “to promote and develop social dialogue in the Furniture sector on a consensual basis”.

Thereafter, two joint opinions were adopted (in 2002 and 2004) on EU enlargement and social dialogue in the new Member States, followed by four declarations (in 2006 and 2007) on extending the social dialogue (Romania and Bulgaria), on training and young workers in the sector, on reducing accidents at work, and on strengthening social dialogue in Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey and Croatia.

The social partners also held a European conference on 25 February 2005 on “The future of the furniture industry in an enlarged Europe”, at which the sector's most favoured topics once again came to the fore: market development, the role of collective bargaining, jobs and training.

The 2007 work programme for the sector likewise emphasises vocational training, competitiveness, health and safety issues and follow-up to work done in the new Member States. It is noticeable that two topics seem to be gaining ground: the need to attract young workers into the sector, and the need to help SMEs cope with the challenges of globalisation (see previous section).

OUTCOMES

The European furniture sector, which is subject to intense international competition, has generated a social dialogue that could be described as “declaratory”. The social partners are attempting to manage change in a context of globalisation by means of strategies akin to the open method of coordination.

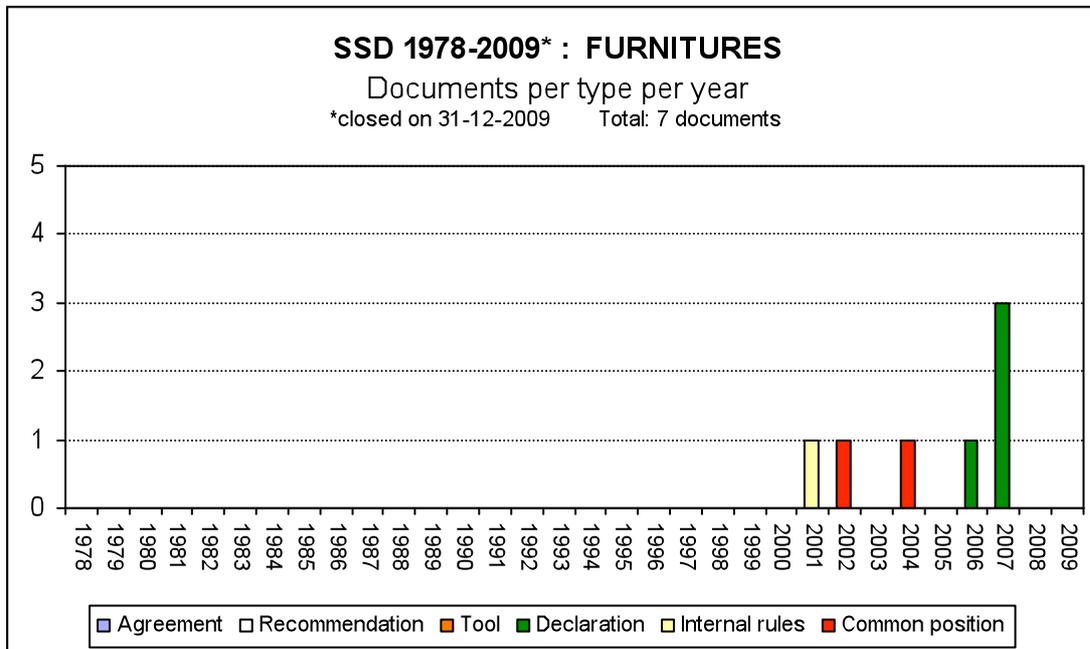
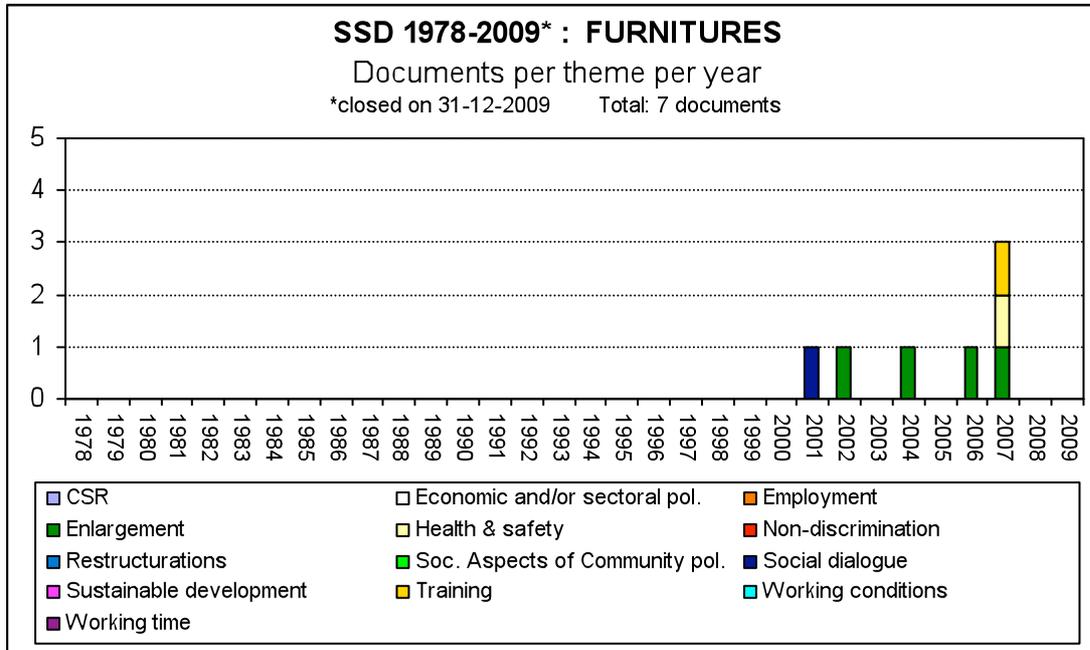
Furniture is a sector that is coming under increasing international competition but is little affected by Community legislation – except in respect of health and safety issues. The typology of the [European Social Observatory](#) (ESO) places it in the category of “sectors managing change in a context of globalisation”, along with others such as textiles, footwear, and tanning and leather.

However, unlike these other sectors, where social dialogue chiefly produces joint opinions aimed at influencing economic, sectoral and employment policies as well as various social aspects of Community policies, the furniture sector mostly generates documents falling into the “declarations” category. For instance, the declaration on reducing accidents at work refers mainly to elements reminiscent of the open method of coordination: best practice, dissemination of results and joint assessments. Similarly, as concerns training and the way in which young workers perceive the sector, the social partners call rather vaguely for greater support for training initiatives and the elaboration of strategies to upgrade jobs in the sector and improve the way it is perceived by young workers.

The two joint opinions adopted in this sector call on the European institutions to help develop the social dialogue and ensure proper implementation of health and safety regulations in the new Member States. There are no joint documents reflecting reciprocal commitments (framework agreements). Social dialogue in this sector can therefore be described as “voluntary” or “declaratory”, which distinguishes it from other sectors exposed to international competition. As stated in the ESO report (Pochet *et al.*, “European sectoral social dialogue 1997-2004”, European Social Observatory, 2004), “we would point out the virtual absence of declarations in sectors heavily exposed to international competition, which tend to prefer recommendations with follow-up procedures”. Furniture therefore appears to constitute an exception from this point of view.

JOINT TEXTS

The “furniture” sectoral social dialogue has resulted, since 2001, in the adoption of 7 joint texts.



Date	Title	Theme	Type	Addressee
02/10/2007	Joint declaration of UEA, EFFIC and EFBWW on the extension of the social dialogue in the enlargement countries	Enlargement	Declaration	National organisations
02/10/2007	Joint declaration of UEA, EFIC and EFBWW on the accident reduction in the furniture industry	Health and safety	Declaration	National organisations
02/10/2007	Joint declaration of UEA, EFIC and EFBWW on the training and education in the furniture industry and on the perception of young people on working in the furniture industry	Training	Declaration	National organisations
19/12/2006	Joint declaration of UEA, EFIC and EFBWW on the extension of the social dialogue in the enlargement countries	Enlargement	Declaration	European social partners
07/02/2004	Joint declaration of UEA and EFBWW on the social dialogue in the enlargement countries	Enlargement	Joint opinion	European institutions
06/07/2002	Joint declaration by the European social partners of the furniture sector on the enlargement at the occasion of their conference on the enlargement held in Budapest on 5-6 July 2002	Enlargement	Joint opinion	European institutions
12/03/2001	Rules of procedure of the dialogue committee in the furniture sector	Social dialogue	Rules of procedure	European social partners