Articles 143 and 145 of the Treaty require the Commission to present annual reports on social and demographic developments. Such an obligation exists since the original Treaty of 1957 establishing the European Economic Community. There are two aspects to this reporting: one concerns the monitoring of the social and demographic situation (the current article 143), the other one concerns policy developments at EU level (article 145). The Treaty also grants the European Parliament the right to ask the Commission for ad-hoc reports on particular problems concerning the social situation.

In spite of these long-standing and sound legal foundations, social reporting and monitoring can be regarded as being still in its infancy. This is attributable to the traditionally weak EU competences in the social policy area comprising notably employment, living conditions, social protection and social exclusion. Over the past ten years, however, the European Union has become much more active in these areas and the emphasis has shifted away from legislation to a loose coordination of national policies, the ‘Open Method of Coordination (OMC)’ which is now applied to employment, social protection and social inclusion. The development of indicators is an important element of the OMC: common and comparable indicators are crucial for measuring progress towards common objectives and even for mutual learning (exchanging information on policy measures only really becomes interesting when their impact can also be measured through harmonised and hence comparable indicators). Thanks to the OMC, social monitoring and reporting at EU level is becoming a reality.

The OMC is a joint operation between the Commission and the Council (i.e. the governments of the Member States). The Commission can also act independently, though, and thus carry out its own social monitoring and reporting. The tool for doing so is the annual report on The Social Situation in the European Union. It has been published five times since 2000 (the 2005 report is forthcoming) and replaces earlier reports on the demographic situation of which several editions were published during the 1990s. The new social situation reports are comparable to the Employment in Europe Reports of which the first was published in 1989. The Commission also issued a small number of Reports on social protection during the 1990s; these became part of the OMC reporting process, though, whereas the social situation and employment reports remained independent Commission reports.

The structure of the Social Situation Reports now comprises four main elements:
(1) a policy oriented summary which is also published separately as a brochure and translated into all EU languages;
(2) one or several thematic chapter on major demographic/social issues;
(3) a series of around 20 concise "statistical portraits" presenting Eurostat data;
(4) and, finally, an annex with the most recent statistical data.
Each of the reports published so far had a special emphasis; they are available on the Commission’s web site:
http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/social_situation/socsit_en.htm

- The first Social Situation report 2000, was prepared as an analytical background paper in view of the Lisbon Spring European Council. The report dealt in particular with the evolving demand for social support and social services and assessed the possibilities for meeting this demand.
- The Social Situation report 2001 focused at the main social trends in relation to the quality of European citizens’ lives and the related challenges for social policy. The promotion of synergies between economic, employment and social policies was acknowledged as a prerequisite for strengthening the European economy and its social model.
- The Social Situation report 2002 dealt with the social dimension of geographical mobility and sought to raise awareness of the issues related to the economic and social integration of migrants.
- The Social Situation Report 2003 had the most extensive thematic section so far. It was devoted to the social dimension of health. It described health trends, examined socio-economic determinants of health, reviewed health care systems and, finally, discussed the role of society and families in promoting good health and tackling health problems.
- The Social Situation Report 2004 portrayed the social dimension of the enlarged Union and looked at emerging social trends and policy challenges. The report underlined that, notwithstanding their differences, all 25 Member States share core social values and concerns and are confronted with the same basic problems of demographic ageing, a shrinking working age population and the need to reform pension and health care systems.

The statistical portraits contributed by Eurostat cover the economic situation, demographic developments (ageing, migration, families and household structures), education and training, employment, social protection, income distribution and poverty, equal opportunities and health and safety at work.

The Commission has a substantial amount of resources at its disposal to prepare these reports. A specific budget line is dedicated to the analysis of, and studies on, the social situation, demography and the family. The amount foreseen for this purpose is around €3 million per year. This money is used by the Commission to fund an 'observatory' (covering demography, income and poverty, health and living conditions and social capital), ad hoc studies, Eurobarometer surveys and, finally, grants to projects that are relevant to the topics covered by the Social Situation Reports.

Some topics for the discussion:

- What is expected from the Commission in terms of social/demographic monitoring and reporting?
- Are the social situation reports appropriate? How could they be improved (new topics to be covered, presentation and analysis of data, routine reporting vs. special topics...)?
- What links should there be between the Commission and the academic community in preparing the Social Situation Report?
- How should the Social Situation Report relate to the OMC?