

# 4th report on economic and social cohesion

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The Committee on Regional Development adopted the own-initiative report by Mr. Ambroise **GUELLEC** (EPP-ED, FR), welcoming the fourth report on economic and social cohesion. It regrets, nevertheless, the lack of cross-data and comparable data from different NUTS levels and calls for better statistical tools, which would allow the degree of economic, social and territorial cohesion on the ground to be measured more accurately, as well as the concrete contribution of local actions to cohesion policy.

The report welcomes the fact that the former cohesion countries (Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland), have caught up remarkably well, but points out that, in spite of their growth, there are still major imbalances between their regions and deep-seated structural problems. The report also welcomes the high growth rates recorded in the new Member States but notes that their economic convergence is to be expected only in the medium or long term and that it will be a long process.

MEPs are concerned that the convergence among countries very often masks the widening gaps between regions and within individual regions. While high growth rates have enabled certain Member States to reach full employment and increase their per-capita GDP, in other countries the differences between individual social groups have widened. MEPs emphasise that, in this context, the most vulnerable sections of the population still require social integration.

The report also emphasises the effect of polarisation in the regions around capital cities, a particularly marked phenomenon in the new Member States, and notes that this polarisation can give rise to great disparities among unemployment rates in city centres. The Commission is, therefore, called upon to specifically address this problem by presenting concrete proposals to control the process of urbanisation. In addition, MEPs stress the importance of integrating gender mainstreaming, equal opportunities and the special needs of persons with disabilities and senior citizens at every stage in the implementation of cohesion policy projects.

MEPs point to the enormous differences between countries in terms of the sums invested in research and development, and note great regional disparities in terms of innovation. They, therefore, call for the implementation of an active policy to support all forms of innovation and also invite the Commission to create possibilities for mutual co-operation between businesses, the public sector, schools and universities in order to create regional innovation clusters. They also call for the swift introduction of transparent rules and standard solutions for public-private partnerships that will enable regions to bring private capital to bear, in pursuit of public objectives.

MEPs call on the Commission to include a definition of 'territorial cohesion' in the forthcoming Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion, in order to make further progress in this Community policy. They also stress the importance of real partnership and the implementation of genuinely multi-level governance involving every level – Community, national, regional and local, in consultation with economic and social partners – in defining and implementing regional development objectives. MEPs also favour the development of an integrated approach that identifies the synergies that are possible between cohesion policy and major sectoral policies such as transport, agriculture, fisheries, rural development, environment and energy, research and technology.

The report proposes that priority be given to policies that serve a genuinely polycentric development of territories, such that the pressures on capital cities are lessened and the emergence of secondary poles encouraged. In this context, support for rural areas and the important role played by small and medium-sized towns located in rural areas should not be overlooked. The report also calls for practical steps to be

taken to reduce the disparities between territorially accessible regions and regions with structural disadvantages, namely islands, mountain areas, sparsely populated areas and peripheral and border regions, recognising the disadvantaged position of the latter and taking special and permanent measures to support them.

Lastly, MEPs emphasise the importance of pilot projects and innovative strategies relating to the adaptation of regions to these new challenges, which have a strong territorial impact exacerbating existing obstacles to regional development, such as demographic change, urban concentration, migratory movements (which are particularly problematic for rural and peripheral areas), energy supply and climate issues and adjustment to the changes arising from globalisation.

Generally, MEPs take the view that cohesion policy needs to be further reinforced. They, therefore, call for sufficient financial resources to be allocated to cohesion policy at Community level. The revision of the financial framework should be used as an opportunity to define the budgetary resources needed to meet all of the Union's cohesion policy challenges.