Strategy for the outermost regions: achievements and future prospects

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PURPOSE: to pursue and extend the strategy for the outermost regions (OR).

CONTENT: article 299(2) of the EC Treaty and the two Communications adopted by the Commission in 2004 stress the need to recognise the special nature of the outermost regions (the "ORs") and to put in place a genuine European strategy to support them.

While giving a positive assessment of the first implementation phase of the OR strategy, the Communication stresses the need to intensify the aspects of the 2004 strategy by adopting additional measures for the period 2007-2013. It also considers the long term challenges, focusing on sensitive issues for ORs: climate change, demographic change, and the management of migration, agriculture and EU maritime policy.

The Commission intends to redouble each aspect of the strategy by taking complementary action:

Aspect 1 - Reduce the accessibility deficit and the effects of other constraints specific to the outermost regions: The following measures could help achieve this goal: i) exploiting the opportunities offered by the use of the specific allocation to offset the additional costs of transport and new information and communication technologies; ii) continuing the effort to fill the broadband gap, particularly via ERDF operational programmes; iii) exploiting the opportunities offered by implementing the TEN-T, TEN-E and Marco Polo II programmes; iv) assessing the specific needs of the ORs when the POSEI programme implementation report is drawn up.

Aspect 2 - Make the outermost regions more competitive: Several instruments may strengthen the competitiveness of the ORs: i) the cohesion policy, particularly through the operational programmes for the period 2007–2013 for both the ERDF and the ESF; ii) Community programmes (recognising the special nature of the ORs in the specific programmes of the 7th FPRTD); exploitation of the Framework Programme on Innovation and Competitiveness as well as of the Lifelong Learning Programme); iii) finally, in relation to the operation of services of general economic interest, the Commission will continue to take account of regional specificities as well as of a detailed analysis of the relevant markets.

Aspect 3 - Strengthen the Wider Neighbourhood Action Plan: Regional integration of the ORs in their vicinities needs to be strengthened by involving public and private local players as well as the Member States concerned. Dialogue between the regions and their neighbouring countries, particularly the ACP (Africa, Caribbean, and Pacific) countries and the overseas countries and territories (OCTs) associated with the EU is the tool for pushing this process forward. There are already some potential measures for pursuing this priority: i) recognising the special nature of the ORs in Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs); ii) coordination of financial instruments; iii) strengthening sea connections between ORs and neighbouring non-member countries; iv) joint participation by ORs and non-member countries in research networks and Community framework programmes; v) recognising the special nature of the ORs in migration policy.

The Communication launches a debate with the European Institutions, the Member States and, within the outermost regions, the regional and local authorities, socio-economic players, the research sector and

academic circles. It is suggested that the consultation phase will last until March 2008. During this period the Commission will organise, in partnership with the regions and Member States concerned, seminars and workshops to discuss the following questions:

- To what extent can the 2004 strategy be adapted to the new challenges facing the ORs?
- What would be the most appropriate ways to tackle the major demographic differences and migratory flows between the ORs and neighbouring regions or countries?
- Is climate change a special challenge to the ORs?
- What actions can the ORs pursue, under European maritime policy, in order to both benefit from it and to be able to contribute to Europe's sustainable development?

After the closure of the public consultation the Commission will prepare its proposal on the future of the partnership with the outermost regions.