Strategy for the outermost regions: achievements and future prospects

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The Committee on Regional Development adopted the own-initiative report by Margie **SUDRE** (EPP-ED, FR) in response to the Commission's communication on the strategy for the outermost regions (ORs).

Achievements of the stronger partnership for the ORs: the report notes that the communication offers a particularly favourable assessment of the action taken by the Commission, even though many of the measures it prides itself on only partly address the needs of the ORs (particularly in the fields of transport and accessibility, research, fisheries and regional cooperation).

MEPs note that Structural Fund intervention continues to play a major role in the development of the ORs. Nevertheless, they would like to see indicators other than merely GDP as compared with the Community average being used to measure the degree of cohesion achieved in these regions. In addition, cohesion policy should be better coordinated with other Community policies across the board, so as to enhance synergies.

Given the role of ORs in the EU's integrated maritime policy, the Commission is called to include in its plan support measures for the fishing industries in these regions.

Fruition stage of the stronger partnership for the ORs: MEPs are concerned at the ever-increasing importance placed by the Commission on tools for assessing Community policies and instruments to assist the ORs, and to estimating the quantitative effects of the handicaps faced by these regions with a view to devising a methodology for offsetting the additional costs linked to their outermost status. They hope that this tendency to take into account increasingly mathematical justifications for the measures taken will not serve as a pretext for calling into question part of the Union's policy to assist the ORs nor deter institutional and economic actors in the outermost regions by imposing conditions on them which are too difficult to meet.

The report reiterates the need for the ORs to be given differential treatment in the area of transport, particularly as regards the inclusion of civil aviation in the European Emission Trading Scheme (ETS) system. Furthermore, MEPs consider that Community interventions should be a catalyst for a spirit of enterprise that will transform the ORs into centres of excellence, driven by sectors which fully exploit their advantages and know-how, such as waste management, renewable energies, energy self-sufficiency, biodiversity, student mobility, research into climate change and crisis management.

Debate on the future of the Union's strategy for the ORs: MEPs commend the Commission on its initiative in opening a debate on the future of the strategy to assist the outermost regions, the results of which will serve as the basis for drawing up a new proposal by 2009. They stress, nevertheless, that this debate should not be confined to the challenges mentioned (climate change, demographic change and migration management, agriculture, maritime policy).

The Committee on Regional Development urges that the scope of Article 299(2) of the EC Treaty (in due course Articles 299 and 311(a) of the Lisbon Treaty), which is the cornerstone of the Union's policy to assist ORs, should be included on the agenda for the debates.

MEPs stress the importance of public services for economic, social and territorial cohesion in the outermost regions, and call for the urgent adoption of measures aimed at combating endemic

unemployment, poverty and unequal income distribution. They also believe that the future common immigration policy should devote special attention to the position of ORs, which are all EU external borders. Moreover, the Community support for agriculture in the ORs should be the object of extensive debate with reference to identifying the real challenges, the need to move towards local self-sufficiency and farm income levels.

Lastly, the ways of overcoming the narrowness of local markets, the increasingly open competitive environment, the difficulty of finding market outlets in mainland European markets or in their respective geographic zones, as well as of improving the coordination of funding for cooperation projects with neighbouring countries, together with effective participation by the ORs in European policies to promote innovation and overcome the digital divide, should also be priorities for debate.