Best practices in the field of regional policy and obstacles to the use of the Structural Funds

2008/2061(INI) - 12/02/2009

The Committee on Regional Development adopted the own-initiative report drawn up by Constanze Angela KREHL (PES, DE) on best practices in the field of regional policy and obstacles to the use of the structural funds. It notes that the regions of the EU are confronted with broadly similar challenges, though their impact differs greatly from region to region: globalisation and the accelerated economic restructuring that goes with it, the consequences of the technological revolution, and climate change, the development of the knowledge-based economy, demographic change, and the rise in immigration. Cohesion policy cannot develop its full potential to meet these challenges since potential applicants for aid are faced with major obstacles in relation to utilising the EU's structural funds, including: excessive bureaucracy too many complex regulations, frequent modification, by certain Member States, of eligibility criteria and requisite documentation; lack of transparency in decision-making processes and co-financing schemes and delays in payments, cumbersome centrally managed administration in Member States; and inadequate decentralised administrative capacity and different models of regional administration in Member States, which prevent the existence of comparative data and the exchange of best practices.

The committee underlines that, although the added value of disseminating best practices among the broader public has to be taken into account, attempts to introduce those practices in EU regional policy should be **directed chiefly to Managing Authorities**. The latter should be helped to draw up rules governing access to structural resources, so that exchanges of information and experience can contribute to a substantive improvement in project quality, by providing solutions to joint problems and choosing more effective interventions. Members point to the need to **simplify the procedures** governing the implementation of Structural Funds projects and programmes, particularly as regards management and control systems. **Removal of obstacles**: the Commission is asked to enact a series of specified measures, such as gearing the evaluation criteria for projects co-financed by the structural funds of the EU to the long term. Members recommend that the Commission go further and develop a concerted, approach to the interregional exchange of best practices, with a view to enabling actors involved in cohesion policy to draw on the experience of others. Bureaucracy in the use of Structural Funds must be kept to a minimum, and not needlessly increased by individual conditions imposed by Member States.

General and subject-specific criteria for identifying best practices: the report criticises the lack of transparency in the Commission's objective bases for identifying best practices, and calls on the Commission, in the light of the widespread use of the term 'best practices', and also the frequent parallel use of the terms 'good practices' or 'success stories', to draw up a set of criteria tailored specifically to cohesion policy that will enable these 'best practices' to be distinguished from those applying to other projects.

Members went on to recommend that the Commission take account of 16 factors in identifying best practices, amongst them, project quality, assurance of partnership principle and sustainability of the measure concerned.

They also recommend that, on the basis of analysis of a large number of projects from many EU regions, additional factors be taken into account for the identification of best practices in cohesion policy areas that are of particular importance for the development of specific regions and of the EU as a whole and that display a marked variety of approaches to implementation.

The committee recommends that account be taken of a series of factors for each of the following areas: 'Research and development/innovation'; 'Environment, climate and sustainable energy policy'; 'Creation of high-quality jobs'; 'Lifelong learning'; 'Integrated urban development'; 'Demographic change'; 'Cross-border cooperation'; and 'Public-private partnerships'.

It is aware that it is exceptionally difficult for a project cumulatively to meet all of these criteria, and calls on the Commission to list the criteria in order of priority, so as to make it easier to designate noteworthy projects as best practices.

Exchange of best practices: Members ask the Commission to do the following:

- to coordinate the exchange of best practices through a network of regions, and to create a public website containing key information about the projects in all Community languages for this purpose;
- to set up within the current administrative framework a specific office in the Directorate-General for Regional Policy to organise, the evaluation, collection and exchange of best practices and to act as a permanent contact point for both the supply and the demand side, with the aim of establishing a long-term, and successful exchange of best practices in the field of cohesion policy;
- to use the available tools of the Committee of the Regions, in particular the Lisbon Monitoring Platform and the Subsidiarity Monitoring Network in order to exchange best practices between regions and Member States.