Green Paper on territorial cohesion and the state for the debate on the future reform of cohesion policy

2008/2174(INI) - 12/02/2009

The Committee on Regional Development adopted the own-initiative report drawn up by Lambert VAN NISTELROOIJ (EPP-ED, NL) on the Commission Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion and the state for the debate on the future reform of Cohesion policy. Members endorse the main conclusions of the public consultation on the future of EU cohesion policy, as presented in the Fifth Progress Report of 19 June 2008 on economic and social cohesion.

Assessment of the Green Paper: the committee welcomes the Commission's adoption of the Green Paper, in response to Parliament's long-standing demand. It considers, however, that the Green Paper lacks ambition to the extent that it fails to propose either a clear definition of or an objective for territorial cohesion and does not advance significantly the understanding of that new concept, so that it can effectively contribute to the alleviation of disparities between regions. It regrets, moreover that the Green Paper does not explain how territorial cohesion will be integrated into the existing framework of cohesion policy or with what methodological tools or resources it will be transformed from a framework of principles into operational mechanisms to be applied on the ground during the next programming period. The committee also considers that the Green Paper does not take due account of the commitments made in the Territorial Agenda and Leipzig Charter, in particular as regards the polycentrism principle or the new urban-rural partnership. Those objectives need to be central to the debate on territorial cohesion.

Members welcome the launching of the **public consultation**, as requested in the Green Paper. They call on the competent authorities to disseminate the relevant information, in order to raise awareness about the importance of this new concept.

The report considers the coordination of all sectoral Community policies that have a strong territorial impact to be central to the development of territorial cohesion. It regrets, therefore, that the relevant analysis in the Green Paper is confined to listing those EU policies without suggesting ways of improving synergies between them or even methods by which, in fact, to measure the territorial impact of those policies.

It agrees with the approach of not including any references to possible budgetary and financial implications of territorial cohesion in the Green Paper or in the public debate. It requests that the outcome of this debate will serve as the basis for the next financial perspectives.

Analysis of the concept of territorial cohesion: the committee endorses the position of the Green Paper that territorial cohesion is about ensuring the polycentric development of the EU as a whole, as well as the balanced and sustainable development of territories with different characteristics while also preserving their diversity.

Members stress the following:

- excellence centres and clusters of research and innovation may be one way of ensuring economic success, and the Commission should present an impact assessment analysing the effect of these on surrounding areas;

- priority be given to any policies that promote a genuinely polycentric development of territories, in order to lessen the pressures on capital cities and encourage the emergence of secondary poles;
- the importance of public services in relation to sustainable development as well as the need for socially and regionally equitable access to services of general interest;
- territorial cohesion should not be a policy exclusively directed towards regions with geographical handicaps, but special consideration should be given on how to offset their handicaps stimulate development;

Recommendations for the future of territorial cohesion: the committee expects that a clear and sufficiently flexible definition of territorial cohesion should result from the public consultation and it notes, in this respect, the proposal for a definition put forward by the French Council Presidency. It considers, however, that territorial cohesion must be subject to the subsidiarity principle in all areas, and that common definitions of concepts such as 'territory', 'rural area' and 'mountain area' should also be established.

A number of elements should be **central to the future definition** of territorial cohesion, including the notion that territorial cohesion extends beyond economic and social cohesion and that its horizontal nature and integrated approach encourages action across territories and boundaries. Territorial cohesion aims at reducing disparities between MemberStates and regions and should ensure the harmonious and sustainable development of geographical areas with different characteristics and specificities by assessing how EU cohesion and other sectoral policies can be best tailored to their situation. Any future definition should also make clear that territorial cohesion should focus strongly on good governance, also with regard to partnership between public, private and civil society players, providing citizens with fair opportunities in terms of living conditions and quality of life.

The committee strongly urges the Commission to proceed with the publication of a **White Paper on territorial cohesion**, following the end of its consultation process. A White Paper would be instrumental in clearly defining the notion of territorial cohesion and its added value for cohesion policy, and would propose concrete provisions and policy actions, which should subsequently be introduced in the post-2013 legislative package on Structural Funds and the related financial framework. An **initial statement** on possible budgetary and financial implications of territorial cohesion should also be included in such a White Paper.