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

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The European Parliament adopted by 585 votes to 35, with 42 abstentions, a resolution on best practices in the field of regional policy and obstacles to the use of the Structural Funds.

Broadly similar challenges for all regions: the resolution 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 opening up of trade relations, the consequences of the technological revolution, and climate change, the development of the knowledge-based economy, demographic change, depopulation and the rise in immigration.

Cohesion policy cannot develop its full potential to meet these challenges whilst potential applicants for aid are faced with **major obstacles** in relation to utilising the European Union's structural funds, including: excessive bureaucracy, too many complex regulations (which in certain cases are available on-line only), frequent modification of eligibility criteria, lack of transparency in decision-making processes and co-financing schemes, inadequate arrangements for interregional coordination and lack of a functioning cooperation scheme between national, regional and local authorities.

Simplifying the procedures: the Parliament stresses that disseminating best practices in EU regional policy should be directed chiefly to **Managing Authorities**, guiding them 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 and targeted interventions. MEPs stress in particular the need to simplify the procedures governing the implementation of Structural Funds projects and programmes, particularly as regards management and control systems.

Removing obstacles: the Commission is called upon to take a certain number of measures, such as: (i) to gear the evaluation criteria for projects co-financed by the Structural Funds to the long term; (ii) to develop specific evaluation criteria for innovative projects; (iii) to draw up special policy measures for regions with specific geographical characteristics; (iv) to coordinate the rules on cost eligibility with the Member States; (v) to ensure advance payments to beneficiaries to a greater extent.

The resolution recommends 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. Identifying best practices must not lead to additional red tape for applicants and project promoters and bureaucracy in the use of Structural Funds must be kept to a minimum.

General and subject-specific criteria for identifying best practices: MEPs criticise the lack of transparency in the Commission's objective bases for identifying best practices. They call on the Commission 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.

The Commission is called upon to take account of **16 general criteria** in identifying best practices, including project quality and its innovativeness, assurance of the partnership principle, sustainability of the measure concerned and the impact on employment and SMEs.

Additional factors: the Parliament recommends 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.

Moreover, MEPs recommend that a number of factors be taken into account for the following areas: (i) research and development/innovation; (ii) environment, climate and sustainable energy policy; (iii) creation of high-quality jobs; (iv) lifelong learning; (v) integrated urban development; (vi) demographic change; (vii) cross-border cooperation; (viii) public-private partnerships.

MEPs are aware that it is exceptionally difficult for a project cumulatively to meet all of the above criteria and call on the Commission, therefore, before applying these criteria, to list them in order of priority and to determine those that represent a higher priority.

Exchange of best practices: the Commission is called upon to:

- organise and 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;
- set up within the current administrative framework a specific office in the Directorate-General for Regional Policy to organise, in cooperation with this network of regions, the evaluation, collection and exchange of best practices, and to disseminate this good-practice culture to all its departments;
- 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.