Implementation of the Structural Funds Regulation 2007 - 2013: the results of the negotiations on the national cohesion strategies and the operational programmes

2008/2183(INI) - 24/03/2009 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 565 votes to 75, with 39 abstentions a resolution in response to the Commission communication on the results of the negotiations concerning cohesion policy strategies and programmes for the programming period 2007 -2013.

The resolution highlights that the last two enlargements of the European Union generated a substantial widening of regional disparities in the Community. The recent reports on cohesion highlight a trend towards a worsening of territorial disparities between EU regions and, at sub-regional level, disparities characterised by phenomena such as spatial segregation, which have resulted in the emergence of a certain kind of ghettoisation, and the continued decline of some remote and predominantly agricultural areas.

Parliament acknowledges the efforts made by all Member States to incorporate the three priorities laid down in the Strategic guidelines on cohesion, which correspond to the objectives of the Lisbon agenda, into their operational programmes. It notes the fairly slow start made to the new programming period in many Member States but is confident that commitments made during the negotiation and approval process of operational programmes will be respected for the benefit of the regions and of the Union as a whole.

The main points covered in the resolution are as follows:

Mitigating regional disparities: Parliament takes note of the determination of Member States to address their specific territorial needs by drawing up strategies to diminish intra-regional and inter-regional imbalances. It reiterates the fact that **economic and environmentally sound development and the reduction of regional disparities** remain the principal goals of EU regional policy.

Parliament regrets that the principles of sustainability, equality of opportunity and non-discrimination, as well as partnership, have been insufficiently applied and documented in many National Strategic Reference Frameworks and Operational Programmes.

The resolution also notes that convergence between countries may mask a widening gap between and within regions. These regional and local disparities can be observed in a number of areas, such as employment, productivity, income, education levels and innovation capacity. Parliament stresses the importance of the **territorial dimension of cohesion** in overcoming these problems. Moreover, it stresses the need to aim cohesion policy at rural areas, since territorial cohesion can only be achieved by developing an urban/rural balance.

Cohesion policy delivering the Lisbon agenda: Parliament appreciates the efforts made by the national authorities to ensure that the average allocation of expenditure for the achievement of the Lisbon agenda constitutes 65% of the available funds in the convergence regions and 82% in the regional competitiveness and employment regions, which is in fact more than was initially requested.

MEPs consider that stronger EU guidelines and increased financial resources must be allocated to serve these objectives and specifically that at least 5% of structural funding should be required to be spent on improving the **energy efficiency of existing homes**.

Parliament encourages regions in their efforts to achieve the Lisbon objectives through thorough and effective implementation of their operational programmes. It also calls on the Commission to **closely monitor their implementation** in order to ensure the translation of the objectives into practice and to **inform Parliament** about the problems encountered.

Parliament considers the financial resources earmarked for the **trans-European energy networks** insufficient, since they are vital for the completion of the internal energy market. It points to the important role played by **small firms and micro-enterprises** and therefore calls for an active policy to support all forms of innovation in these enterprises. The Commission is urged to create opportunities for mutual cooperation between businesses, the public sector, schools and universities, in order to create regional innovation clusters in the spirit of the Lisbon Strategy.

Responding to globalisation and structural change: Parliament welcomes the fact that all Member States devoted a significant amount of their total financial allocations to investments in R&D and innovation. It notes that for most of the Union's convergence regions, ensuring accessibility remains a significant problem, as they face a lack of transport infrastructure. In order to increase the competitiveness of Member States and the Union, the resolution supports the priority in the cohesion policy to unlock business potential, particularly that of SMEs.

Demographic change and more inclusive labour markets: Parliament congratulates Member States on their efforts to prioritise investments aimed at increasing labour participation, ensuring equal opportunities and supporting initiatives designed to improve the situation of women in the labour market. Member States are called upon to take account of the impact on women and the gender dimension in relation to all Structural Fund projects.

MEPs also stress that it is important and necessary to continue efforts to support employment in the face of the growing economic crisis, taking particular account of the special needs of people with disabilities and senior citizens.

Responding to the challenges of sustainable development, climate change and energy: Parliament considers that measures aimed at protecting the environment, combating climate change and promoting energy efficiency should be incorporated into all operational programmes. It also appreciates the commitments made by Member States in order to address these issues, by allocating approximately one third of the total cohesion policy budget to them. However, it considers that the specific allocations for combating climate change and promoting energy efficiency are insufficient to meet real needs.

The report stresses that, in times of economic crisis, Member States should capitalise on the notion of achieving synergies between environmental protection and job creation stipulated in the Strategic Guidelines on Cohesion and allocate more resources into projects that promote green economy, green jobs and green innovation.

Reinforcing governance: Parliament considers that multi-level governance and the partnership principle are key elements of the effectiveness of operational programmes during the programming phase and especially during the implementation process. It considers that **transparency** in the allocation of funding and **administrative simplification** facilitating the access of potential beneficiaries of the Structural Funds to information are key preconditions for achieving the overall objectives of cohesion policy.

Gender dimension: Parliament calls on the Member States to take account of the impact on women and the gender dimension in relation to all Structural Fund projects.

In conclusion: Member States are called upon to strengthen the procedures they put in place in order to ensure that a fully operational **integrated approach** is applied for the implementation of cohesion policy, thus ensuring that all aspects of any particular operational programme are duly considered. The resolution encourages the Commission in its efforts to ensure that Member States operate **efficient control systems** in order to be able to apply sound financial management to Community expenditure.

Lastly, the report notes that the current global economic crisis has created a new situation in all Member States that requires **re-evaluation and the possible adaptation of investment priorities**. In this context, Parliament welcomes the Commission's proposals for amending the Regulations in order to meet the needs of the Union in these exceptional circumstances. It reiterates its view that cohesion policy is central to economic recovery, throughout the whole of the territory of the Union and, therefore, rejects any attempt to renationalise the policy.