Cohesion policy in mountainous regions of the EU

2015/2279(INI) - 04/04/2016 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Regional Development adopted the own-initiative report by Iliana IOTOVA (S&D, BG) on cohesion policy in mountainous regions of the EU.

Mountainous regions in the EU are rarely in the focus of Cohesion Policy. Yet, **mountainous regions represent a significant amount of EU territory** (around 30 %), and the entirety of the EU depends on their ecosystem services.

This report focuses on how the mountains of the EU can contribute to its targets, such as Europe 2020. It contains the following recommendations:

Coordinated approach and general considerations: the report called on the Commission to start the process of creating a **working definition for functional mountainous regions** in the context of Cohesion Policy, complementing the definition of mountainous areas as used in the context of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, with the aim of improving coordination of the policies and measures concerned.

This definition must be wide and inclusive, taking into account different factors such as altitude, accessibility and slope. It should cover volcanic regions in islands and outermost regions, as well as areas that, while not mountainous, are largely integrated with mountain areas. Members welcomed the current initiatives for the Carpathian Mountains in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region and the progress made on the EU macro-regional strategy for the Alps.

The Commission is also invited to:

- present a communication containing an '**agenda for EU mountainous regions'** and subsequent to this, present a **White Paper** on the development of mountainous regions, based on best practices and involving local, regional and national authorities;
- encourage the **use of financial instruments** in mountainous regions in order to reach concrete results;

Members also called for **synergies to be increased** by means of the coordination of EU policies, strategies and programmes that have an indirect effect upon mountainous regions, such as Horizon 2020, COSME, LIFE, Natura 2000, the EU Broadband Strategy, the EU Climate Adaptation Strategy, the EU Environment Action Programme, the Connecting Europe Facility, European Territorial Cooperation, ESI Funds and the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI), as well as macro-regional strategy initiatives.

The European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) instrument offers an excellent opportunity to share best practices and knowledge among mountainous regions, which in many cases are located on national borders. Members called for a specific mountain dimension in the future ETC.

Jobs and economic growth in mountainous regions: in this regard, the report highlighted the need to:

- pay specific attention to the **development of SMEs** in mountainous regions, particularly areas affected by natural and climate-aggravated disasters, urges the Member States accordingly to give priority to investment in **infrastructure and services** in mountain areas;

- improve the **marketing of agricultural products** and including them within the general tourism products of a given geographical area; moreover, as mountain areas have strong potential for producing high-quality food products and to start the debate about introducing **special labelling** for mountain food products at EU level;
- emphasise, within the strategy, the **economic dimension of forestry taking into account the** economic and social role of forestry in mountain areas;
- put in place additional incentives to **preserve small processing enterprises and small and medium-sized mountain farms** in mountainous areas;
- use the ESI Funds for **economic sectors that do not pollute and are future-oriented**, such as sustainable tourism, cultural heritage, sustainable forestry, high-speed internet development, crafts, and renewable energy.

Sustainable growth, environment, accessibility: the report lays down the points that should be included in the agenda and the sector-specific policy:

- increase the qualifications of the workforce and **creating new jobs in the green economy** should be part of the investment priorities of the ESI Funds;
- **attract young people** into the agricultural sector by encouraging young entrepreneurs to branch out in areas relating to cultural heritage;
- the **CAP** should aim to compensate the natural and economic disadvantages that farmers face but should also give them the means to capitalise on their assets;
- ensure **sustainable milk production** in mountain areas;
- ensure the development and improvement of **healthcare facilities** and services in mountainous regions;
- support innovative solutions, including IT-based ones, for access to basic quality education, as well as formal and informal education and lifelong learning opportunities, in remote mountainous areas;
- more effective implementation of the **Youth Guarantee** as a good opportunity to stop the outflow of young people from mountainous regions;
- focus on policies that encourage and facilitate the use of **renewables** in mountainous regions and place climate change at the heart of a future 'Agenda for EU Mountainous Regions'.

Lastly, Members considered that the Internet, and more specifically, next-generation access technologies play a crucial part in overcoming the challenges faced by mountainous regions. They considered therefore that specific support from ESI Funds is needed for the **promotion of employment, social inclusion and empowerment in the emerging digital economy**.