Economic and social cohesion and information society

1997/2021(COS) - 25/11/1997

The Committee unanimously adopted the motion for a resolution by Angela del Carmen SIERRA GONZÁLEZ (EUL/NGL, E) on the Commission communication on cohesion and the information society. According to the Commission, one of the central objectives of the gradual liberalisation of the telecommunications markets is to make the opportunities offered by the emerging information society available throughout Europe. However, there is a serious danger that investment in some regions will be slow in coming. A polarisation between 'information haves' and 'information have-nots' has to be averted as the new technologies spread. Thus, the emerging information society needs to be complemented by policy measures to ensure that it develops at the desired rate throughout the Union and that all regions are enabled to enjoy its benefits equally. Universal service provision plays an important role in providing access to information and communication technologies. However, the information society also has considerable potential for strengthening economic and social cohesion by reinforcing the competitiveness of the regions. Competitiveness is increasingly determined by the ability of regions to absorb the new technologies available in the information society. The information society also offers opportunities for SMEs to create new highly skilled jobs and to boost employment. For its part, the Committee on Regional Policy believes that the emergence of a multimedia world, which is bringing with it structural changes in working methods, forms of business organization, administration and individual leisure activities, makes it difficult to design measures to mitigate the adverse effects of these changes, for example the impact of new technologies on employment among traditional telecommunications operators. As a result, job losses may be final, particularly in regions which are already lagging behind significantly in the area of technology. The question is whether the growing use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) will destroy more jobs than it creates, and over what period this can be judged. The committee believes there is as yet insufficient evidence to reach a verdict. ICTs are seen as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for local economic development. The growing use of ICTs may lead to the creation of a technocratic elite and thus an even less equal and cohesive society. Moreover, "average figures" may hide the existence of major differences within countries (in Spain, for example, Madrid was found to have 45 telephone lines per hundred inhabitants against 22 in Estremadura). It is precisely because of such differences in regional and infrastructure development that one of the EU's primary objectives is to promote the overall harmonious development of the Community (Article 130a). To improve the effectiveness of this policy, the committee stresses that the accessibility and affordability of telecommunications networks and services are prerequisites for participation in the process of development towards the information society. The penetration rate of PCs in the EU is currently estimated to be around 10 per 100 people, compared to 34 in the US. In 1995, there were 15.2 PCs per 100 people in the European core regions but only 3.1 in Greece, 8.6 in Spain, 6 in Portugal and 8.9 in Italy. However, the technology itself is less important than the ability to use information and transform it into knowledge. The committee therefore calls for national and regional funding to be used to guarantee full participation by the EU's less favoured regions in the information society. It also calls on the Commission to make available specific across-the-board budgetary resources to protect the interests of such regions. In addition, the committee urges that Agenda 2000 make more specific provision for the information society. It expresses concern at the fact that only 2% of expenditure under the Structural Funds goes to investment in the telecommunications sector and says that the Structural Funds, and particularly the Community initiatives, should be used in synergy with the projects of common interest. Among the new working opportunities offered by the information society, teleworking, according to the committee, merits particular consideration. Teleworking has the potential to evolve into an indirect means of regional planning, since it is designed to make use of technologies capable of spanning distances while enabling workers to remain in their own environment.