Structural Fund: use of resources

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The committee adopted the report on the implementation of structural fund appropriations almost unanimously. Comparing the results of the previous programming period (1983-1993), which the Commission considered to be highly satisfactory from the point of view of implementation, with little, delayed or no implementation from the new period (1994-1999), especially in 1994 and 1995, the rapporteur, Mr Rolf Berend (PPE, A), stated that he did not wish to draw any dramatic conclusions. First, 1996 and the first two quarters of 1997 had marked a turning point in the implementation of appropriations (at a rate of 98%), indicating partial normalisation of all the Funds, with the exception of the FIFG. In addition, the degree of uptake varied greatly depending on the intervention, the Fund and the Member State: thus, in 1994, the drop was accounted for by Community initiatives (12% implementation), the programming period of which was late starting up; furthermore, during 1994-95, the new definition of objectives 3 and 4 and long negotiations on regions eligible for aid under objectives 2 and 5 b caused a slowdown; as for the Member States, at the end of 1995, Belgium (objectives 1 and 5 b), Italy (all objectives), the Netherlands (objective 2) and France (objectives 1, 2, 5 b), plus Sweden (objectives 3, 4, 5 a) at the end of 1996, implemented initial programming at a much lower than average rate. In any event, the rapporteur considered that the failure to implement appropriations was not due solely to current economic factors but rather to a whole series of structural deficiencies. These could be abstracted and summarised under three categories of causes: - administrative and procedural causes, the negative impact of which at all stages of implementation was felt at both regional/national and European level (with real backlogs during the selection of projects, modification of programmes, ex-post evaluation and monitoring); - fiscal causes, due either to the lack of co-funding or to co-funding problems, especially in regions with no financial autonomy; - by macroeconomic causes, which would explain the link between regional competitiveness and the implementation of appropriations, i.e. the positive impact of weak competitiveness on objective 1 and 5 b regions and, by contrast, the negative impact on objective 2 regions. Another important cause of the extremely poor rates of implementation during the first two years must be attributed to the bad start to the 1994-1999 programming period, which was characterised by numerous delays, Mr. Berend felt that we should learn from this experience that a successful start-up begins well before the official launch of each planning period. The rapporteur therefore emphasised the time factor and hoped that new framework regulations would be adopted before 1998, so that local, regional and national authorities would have sufficient time to prepare and submit programmes which could then be rapidly implemented in the year 2000. Finally, the report adopted contains other recommendations with a view to improving the situation: properly structured partnership to reduce administrative segmentation, guaranteed co-funding to ensure that programmes run smoothly and improved coherence between national and European policies in order to harmonise objectives, strategies and measures. The rapporteur also rejected any reduction in the Funds decided by the Council, since this did not resolve the problem of implementation and undermined the expenditure target agreed in Edinburgh; on the contrary, he favoured the proposal presented by the Commission in its Agenda 2000 to create a reserve for faster funding of appropriations from the Structural Funds.